



CONTRACT OF A
Billionaire



EVA WINNERS

CONTRACT OF A BILLIONAIRE

BILLIONAIRE KING SERIES

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*Love is a puzzle.
When you're in love, all the pieces fit.
But when your heart gets broken,
It takes a long time to piece it back together.
And sometimes the pieces never quite fit right.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book touches on some sensitive subjects and might be sensitive for some readers.

There is trigger content related to - loss of family, suicide, abuse, violence.

Resemblance to actual persons and things living or dead, locales, or evens is entirely coincidental.

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*This one is for all my readers.
You've made my dream come true.
You've changed my life.
THANK YOU!*

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BILLIONAIRE KING SERIES COLLECTION

Each book in the Billionaire King series can be read as a standalone.

Enjoy!

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PROLOGUE



The rain pounded against the hospital windows. Exhaustion lingered in my bones. Every single inch of me ached.

But the moment I held him in my arms, I knew he was my most beautiful creation.

Dark hair. Stormy eyes.

Though the latter could be the fact he was just born and they were more murky.

It didn't matter. He was utter perfection.

Kol.

It meant the dark one. It fit him. Kol Alessandro Corbin.

Mom, Dad, and Branka stayed with me in the hospital through twenty hours of labor and many hours afterward. But I finally made them leave.

They needed rest. And I needed alone time with my baby. To bury this longing ache that lingered in my chest.

All these months and I still hadn't been able to forget him.

Alessio Russo wasn't a man that was easily forgotten.

Even with the words that still rang in my ears from our last encounter.

I SMELLED the nicotine before I was fully awake.

My heart latched onto it. Nobody I knew smoked. Except for Alessio.

The silver smoke wrapped around the room, stealing my breath and my dreams.

No smoking in the hospital.

My eyes shot open. A shadow loomed over my son who slept peacefully, a burning red circle piercing the gloom. It was the tip of a cigarette but it wasn't Alessio standing there.

Something's wrong.

"Get away from my son," I rasped, straightening up in the hospital bed.

I ignored the pain in my abdomen.

His face turned from my son and my heart froze. Alessio's father.

I scrambled up the pillow reaching for the nurse call button.

"Nice kid."

His voice was full of disgust. *Hate.*

A bolt of fear shot through me, the terror soaking through my skin. His face was sinister, and the gun in his other hand didn't escape me. He took a drag on his cigarette and then blew smoke into Kol's face.

"Get away from my son," I warned, my voice trembling. There was nothing I wouldn't do to protect him.

His menacing, dark eyes met mine. "Now you listen to me, you Corsican trash. You and your son will never come around Alessio again." I swallowed, fear thundering in my ears.

The adrenaline pulsed in my veins, making me lightheaded, but I refused to back down. I shifted off the hospital mattress, inching my way closer and closer to my son.

"And Branka?" I whispered.

He shrugged. "She's useless."

This man was a fucking lunatic. A cruel, sadistic bastard. Just like Branka described him.

"She's not useless," I spat at him. "She's an amazing, good person."

Another inch closer to my son. I just had to grab him and get the fuck away from here. Nurses had been in and out of this room all goddamn night. But now that I wanted one here, they were nowhere to be seen.

"You, Autumn Corbin, and your family are a fucking plague. Stay away from Alessio, or I'll make you and your family pay. Alessio has other women to fuck." My heart shattered; pieces of the fragile organ scattered at my feet. Even after all this time, it fucking hurt like hell.

Alessio's words still rang in my brain. I was just a good fuck to him. Nothing more; nothing less.

His eyes lowered to my son, his lips curving into a cruel smirk. "And *this* will be a dead bastard if I see you around."

Before I could blink, he pushed his butt into my baby and a scream shattered through the hospital. Kol's and mine.

"Get away from him!" I had no idea how or when I threw myself on him, my fists hitting against his back.

He threw me off him easily, my back hitting the cold hospital tile. Black dots swam through my vision. A high-pitched scream from my baby filled the space. The scent of smoke. A cloud filling the air.

Horror tore through me.

This can't be happening.

The cigarette still burned in my son's cradle.

CHAPTER I

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AUTUMN

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FOUR YEARS EARLIER



Okay, celebrating your college graduation on top of a bar, dancing and shooting darts wasn't exactly the most mature way to get recognition for four years of hard work.

Yes, it took us an extra semester. The first year was hard. Both Branka and I failed most of our classes the first semester and never caught up. We weren't geniuses. Just two average girls with an artistic gene. Or something like that.

But we finally graduated. Yes, summer was behind us, but we had our entire lives ahead of us. Many more summers.

My dreams were finally coming true. I got an offer for an internship with *National Geographic* and my first assignment started in a week. A freaking week. I would travel the world taking pictures. My father was always a fan of the old adage "a picture's worth a thousand words."

I wanted my pictures to make a difference in this world. Hopefully, make the world a better place.

"Another shot for the girls," someone shouted in the back.

It was amazing what a tight mini-dress could accomplish. Drinks followed, Branka and I danced on top of the bar, moving sensually. Slow, fast, slow. After weeks of

packing, studying, and more packing, we deserved to celebrate and unwind.

The loud music pumped through the speakers, vibrating through every surface. The music bounced off the walls, the latest Dua Lipa's best hits album playing one after another. A few of the girls danced together on the bar, while others were too busy sealing their lips to their boyfriends or men they'd never met.

My gaze traveled over the crowd. It was September yet most girls wore skimpy little summer dresses. But then, this was California. Summer dresses were almost a year round outfit.

The bar was too crowded. Probably over capacity, but nobody had started kicking us out. Our last week here. The last four years had been filled with some seriously wild shit, but we never got in trouble. Branka claimed it was because her brother had connections everywhere.

Alessandro Russo.

He didn't even remember me or the whole incident on my eighteenth birthday. I was so nervous and excited that day. Branka and I couldn't wait to get to the University of California, Berkeley. We shared a birthday and celebrated at my parents' home that day.

The birthday party was still in full swing. The chatter and laughter of guests could be heard from downstairs. My family. Friends. Branka, my best friend. From the moment my parents and I moved to Montréal, the two of us clicked and had been inseparable ever since.

"I'm sorry your brother couldn't make it today," I murmured. I knew how much she hoped he'd be here. He was the only family she loved. The only family that was there for her.

"It's okay." A hint of bitterness colored her voice.

I reached for her hand and squeezed it gently in comfort. "It's not okay," I murmured. "But I'm happy I got to spend all day with you."

From all she had told me, her brother always came through. It could be that he was just late. In four years, I had yet to meet the famous, or infamous, brother.

Alessandro Russo. Alessio to those closest to him.

Untouchable. Ruthless. Corrupt.

Connected to the mafia. Not that I'd seen it firsthand. Those were just the rumors. In reality, it could be that the guy was just a ruthless businessman. If there was one thing I'd learned from my parents, things weren't always what they seemed.

"Send him another message," I suggested softly.

She shook her head.

"Father reads my messages. Sometimes I think he reads his, too." Huh? There were so many things I didn't understand about Branka's family. "I don't want him to give me a hard time." Another difference between her parents and mine. Her father was mean, cruel even. And her mother, well she seemed to be only a ghost of who she once was.

"You can use my phone if you want," I offered. I knew how much it meant to her to see him today.

"That's okay, thanks. I called Alessio earlier and left him a voicemail that I'd be here."

I nodded. The two of us stood in front of the mirror. She had changed for the occasion and looked gorgeous in her sheer, golden dress that was long in the back but shorter in the front. The contrast of gold against her dark, auburn hair was striking. I still wore my white, skater dress.

"I just can't wait to get out of here," she remarked, meeting my gaze in the mirror. Her gray eyes turned dark, like storm clouds, every time she was sad. "Our last night in Montréal. Let's make it a memorable night."

I nodded although I wasn't as thrilled about leaving my parents behind. I was excited about going to California and attending university there. But unlike her, I also couldn't

wait to come back to visit my parents. And we hadn't even left yet.

Branka's eyes traveled over me. "Are you going to change?"

I lowered my eyes. "What?" I swept my hand over my skater dress. "This isn't good enough?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's fine for an everyday event, but not for our birthday. Today's special."

"Fine, fine," I retorted dryly. "I'll change."

Turning eighteen seemed to be a big deal. Yet the same face I'd known yesterday stared back at me today in the mirror. Same raven black hair. Same hazel eyes. My mouth was still the same, that top lip slightly bigger than my bottom one.

"Do you feel older?" I asked.

She shrugged her slim shoulders. "Not really. But we're eighteen now. Legal adults."

My lips curved into a smile. I wasn't quite sure if I felt like an adult. Or that I was even ready to be an adult. I was certainly in no rush.

"I guess I better hurry up and change before all the food is gone," I said, eyeing the dress that Branka picked out. It was a beautiful dress, but it was way over the top for a simple birthday party in the backyard. So was Branka's, although that didn't seem to stop her.

She clapped her hands. "Wonderful, I'll wait for you downstairs. I need to have some of your mother's crème brûlée before it's all gone."

She was out the door before I could even protest. It would have been wonderful if she'd given me a boost of confidence once I tried the fancy dress on. I didn't want to look like an overdressed peacock.

"Save me some," I yelled after her. "Hide it from everyone."

Her laugh rang down the steps, right along with her thumping heels against my parents' hardwood floors.

My eyes roamed over the room where Branka and I spent so much time together over the last four years. It wasn't grand or super luxurious, but I loved my room nonetheless. Pink and white bedding over the mahogany canopy bed. The antique white dresser and the vanity were the only other furniture in my bedroom.

Frames with my parents' pictures stood on the dresser. Our trips all over the world. It was where I got my taste for adventure and the will for justice.

Nostalgia hit me. One more night and I'd no longer lay my head down to sleep under my parents' roof. One more night and I'd be thousands of miles away.

"I guess it's part of growing up," I mumbled under my breath softly.

I shook my head, then took off my dress, leaving me only in my white panties and bra. Discarding it into my hamper, I reached for my dress, hanging it on the rail of my canopy with my back to the door. It slipped off the hanger, falling silently to the floor.

Bending over, my ass in the air, my fingers curled around the soft material was exactly the position I was in when the door opened.

"What the... ?" A deep voice came from behind me.

For a moment, I stayed frozen, staring at the man upside down through my legs. Shiny black loafers. Tailored and expensive business suit. Stormy gray eyes that studied me.

Or maybe he studied my butt in the thong.

I shot up, whirling around.

The moment I saw him upright, my step faltered back involuntarily.

Hard face. Even harder eyes.

A shudder shot up my spine, and for a fraction of a moment, I forgot to breathe. The most gorgeous face I had ever seen. But it was not that which took hold of me. It was the darkness and ruthlessness in his gray gaze. A gaze the color of the skies right before a thunderstorm.

The angular jawline spoke of determination and stubbornness. The slight stubble on his face made him appear harsh and untouchable. Not that he needed it, because I'd be terrified if I found myself alone in a dark alley with him. The dark three-piece-suit hugged his broad, towering frame.

Lethal.

This man was lethal. I might have turned eighteen only today, but I'd stake my life on it. This man could end a human life without losing sleep.

His one hand was tucked into the pocket of his suit pants while the other hung casually down his body. My eyes flickered to that strong veiny hand. A single ring on it with some weird looking symbol. The letter 'A' with a skull.

We stared at each other, frozen, the seconds stretching into a lifetime. He was like a dark demon focused on his prey.

"What are you doing here?" I snapped out of my stupor, trying to appear brave.

"Where is she?" he snapped back.

"How in the hell should I know?" I narrowed my eyes on him. He reeked of darkness and danger. You'd think I was smart enough to scream for help. "Who the hell is she?"

My father always said that sometimes I was too brave for my own good. But I wasn't reckless. At least not now. All I had to do was scream and my father would come after this guy. Although, if I was honest with myself, I wasn't sure that Dad could kick his ass.

He cocked his eyebrow, as if he was surprised. When he didn't answer, I continued, "And who are you?" My voice hitched just a tad bit higher, while my heart thundered against my ribs.

He slipped his other hand into his pocket as his gaze fell down my body, lazy and observant. Just as slowly, his gaze traveled back up my barely decent state.

"Watch your tone, little girl," he drawled.

Be smart, Autumn. Be smart, Autumn.

"Or what, old man?" I sneered. Jesus, this wasn't smart, yet my mouth refused to stop. "One peep and my dad will... Kick. Your. Ass."

Maybe. But he didn't need to know that.

He took a step forward, I took one back. Another step towards me and like we were made of the same poles on two magnets, I took one back.

"You really think so?" His tone was low, deep, almost threatening.

I pushed my shoulders back and realized my mistake right away. I revealed more of my barely covered body. But I couldn't show weakness.

"I do," I sneered. "Now get lost."

His eyes narrowed, then traveled down my body again, leaving me feeling strangely breathless and my heart racing in my chest.

I attempted the same tactic and let my gaze fall down his body. It was a mistake because it became even more apparent how tall, muscular, and breathtaking he was. Not a good conclusion to come to while alone with a stranger in the room.

My eyes locked on his shiny, expensive, black shoes. Italian leather, if I had to guess. He still wasn't moving. But now we stood so close together, I could smell his spicy, woodsy scent. Powerful, just like his presence.

"What's your name?" His question caught me off guard, and I lifted my eyes back to his, meeting those dark stormy eyes.

"None of your business," I snickered. "What's yours?"

Where did that come from?

"None of yours," he deadpanned. "If I tell you, I'd have to kill you."

What. The. Hell?

"Get out!" I took a step forward, and pushed my palm against his chest, then realized I dropped the dress that

covered my upper torso. I quickly folded my arms in front of my chest.

We still stood in the middle of my girly bedroom, his towering frame in a dark suit looking ridiculous among all my pink.

His eyes lowered to where my palm rested only seconds ago, then came back to my face. We looked at each other for a moment and I realized his hand was on my wrist, the rough pads of his fingertips brushing against my fluttering pulse.

"Careful, Autumn," he drawled. "Or you'll find yourself in the wrong bedroom."

It wasn't until he was long gone that the realization sunk in.

He knew my name!

Ten minutes later, I smoothed the non-existent wrinkles of the light pink dress. It hugged my body too tightly, making it hard to breathe. I wasn't used to wearing snug clothing and heels. Being careful not to get my strappy pink heels stuck in the dirt, I kept my gaze focused on the ground. The music and laughter vibrated all around me and a smile already formed on my lips.

"Autumn, come and say hello to our guest." Maman's voice traveled through the air.

Taking a step over the gravel, I steadied my ankle.

"I'm coming," I grumbled. "These damn shoes are getting stuck."

Another two steps, I looked up and froze.

A pair of dark gray eyes in a black three-piece-suit watched me, pinning me to my spot. The guy that barged into my bedroom stood next to my father. A smile lifted his lips and my eyes locked on them. Such sensual, well-proportioned lips. I wondered how he kissed.

Hard. Rough. Wet. Demanding.

"There you are." My mother pressed a kiss on my cheek. "Joyeux anniversaire, ma chérie." Happy birthday, my

mother wished me in French.

"Merci, Maman," I murmured, keeping my eyes on the stranger.

A set of arms wrapped around me and I swayed. "He made it," Branka squealed in delight.

"Who?" I muttered, flicking a frown her way, then returning it to the gorgeous stranger. Why was he talking to my dad?

"My brother." My head whipped her way and I followed her gaze. "Alessio." I swallowed hard, remembering how I yelled at him barely ten minutes ago.

"Autumn, meet Mr. Alessio Russo." My father's tone held a note of caution. The one that told me he'd rather not have me talk to the man. If only he knew, I spent a few minutes alone with him. "Mr. Russo, my daughter Autumn."

I tipped my head in greeting as a warm rush of adrenaline ran down my spine at the way he watched me and the recognition of his name. I met his heavy gaze, dark gray eyes shaded by thick, dark lashes that could fool you into thinking his eyes were darker than they really were.

"Miss Corbin." His voice was indifferent but something amused and dangerous played in his gaze, challenging me.

I'd stake my life that all the rumors of Alessandro Russo's ruthlessness were true.

I blinked, returning to the present.

It was ridiculous that even after four years, thinking about him had my heart racing in my chest. Fifteen years my senior, Branka's brother, was way out of my league. Not that I wanted him in my league. He was a gentleman on the outside, but dangerous and ruthless underneath that expensive suit he loved to wear.

And he had connections to the mafia, for Pete's sake.

I didn't need that kind of trouble in my life. But those steel-like eyes! That mouth! That body! The chemistry I felt in that very moment when I had met him has never been

replicated. It was barely a fleeting moment in his book. In mine, it was a life changing event in a mere second.

I'd never forgotten him. It'd be impossible to forget that face, that gaze that held me captive, and that jaw with a mouth that I was certain knew how to bring pleasure. One look at him and shudders rolled down my spine. The ruthless man with a gorgeous face was exactly what I didn't need but my body seemed to want him.

The music pumped remix after remix, my skin glistened with sweat, the crowd became rowdier and rowdier when I heard my name, loud and clear, over the pounding music. My eyes roamed the room, but I didn't see a single familiar face.

"Branka. Autumn." Again, our names were called out.

Branka and I shared a glance, then both of our eyes traveled over the faces in the crowd.

Two men walked confidently through the crowded room, their eyes zeroed in on us. Branka took a step closer to me at the same time, I stepped closer to her.

"Do you know them?"

Her eyebrows furrowed, recognition in her gaze. "They're my brother's friends."

My eyes flickered back to the two men striding towards us like they owned this joint. Danger was part of these two men, and not because of the ink that marked their skin on their necks and hands, but it was the harshness in their gaze. Darkness in their eyes that resembled that of Alessio Russo.

"Are you sure?" I barely got the words out when the two men stopped in front of us.

"Ladies. I'm Cassio King and this is my brother, Luca. We've come to take you home."

Branka and I shared a glance. We planned on hanging out here for another week before I headed out for my assignment. Asia. Kuala Lumpur. My finger itched to start snapping photographs.

Branka waved her hand as if that would send them away.
“No, thank you.”

“I’m afraid, I’ll have to insist,” the other guy chimed in. Luca King. Cassio and Luca King. In the back of my mind, I searched for that name. It was familiar. I’ve heard it before. The alcohol I’d consumed wasn’t helping.

Cassio and Luca King.

Mafia. Their father, Benito King, was one of the most feared men on the East Coast of the United States. And his sons weren’t far behind them.

“Your mother is dead, Branka,” Cassio explained. “And your brother needs you back.” A soft gasp escaped my lips and I glanced at my best friend. She kept her expression masked, but I knew she cared. She wasn’t as close to her mother as I was to mine, but she loved her. The poor woman married a hard, cruel man and it broke her.

I felt the men’s eyes on me and I turned to look at them.

“Miss Corbin, you can come along. Alessio indicated you and Branka are close, and she’ll need all the support she can get.”

Hesitation slithered through me. I wanted to be there for Branka, but I wasn’t sure that I wanted to see her brother. Or her father.

Branka slid her hand into mine and our eyes locked. “Please come,” she choked out, her lower lip trembling and there was no way I could refuse her.

CHAPTER 2

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ALESSIO



I fucking hated funerals.

The fact that it was my mother's made it ten times worse. I hadn't been close to my mother. It was impossible with my father - correction, bastard stepfather - around.

The fucker loved tormenting everyone around him. He hadn't even given Branka a chance to say goodbye. He held our mother cut off from everyone until she was dead. For goddamn days.

Throwing an impatient look at my watch, I noted the time. I had another twenty minutes before I had to head out, or I wouldn't make it to the cemetery on time. I poured myself another scotch and downed it in one gulp.

Montréal. Québec. I ruled everything in these territories and east of them, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean.

From the window of my office, I could see the Saint Lawrence River. The ships traveled at a slow speed, fooling you into believing this city had a slow pace. It was anything but slow, and the corruption ran deep. I'd experienced it firsthand.

Fuck, I ran it. Owned it. Ruled it.

Before me, it was my stepfather that had these streets running red. He climbed the ladder by killing the innocent,

weak, and powerful; no cost was too great to him when reaching for his goal.

I guess in that regard he wasn't too different from my biological father.

Fuck them both. I just wished it was him that I was burying today.

Not my mother.

He knew it too. It was the fucking reason he pulled that stunt. Jesus fucking Christ, I tasted what this world would be without him for the briefest moment. Thank God I didn't message Branka to let her know. She endured enough torment from our father. This would have been too much.

Now, I had to protect my sister more than ever. I failed Mia, I couldn't repeat the same mistake. Branka couldn't endure Father's cruelty. It left a goddamn mark on her, although she appeared strong and invincible. She wasn't; if anything, she was fragile and so easily breakable.

Flicking another glance out the window, I knew time was running out. I poured another and relished in the bitterness as it slid down my throat.

I'd have to head to the gravesite.

If for nobody else, then for Branka. For my mother. For Mia.

THE RUSSO MANSION was the most expensive stretch of real estate in the province of Québec, possibly Canada. It was two hundred acres of prime real estate on one of the Great Lakes.

My mother would be buried among all the other Russo family members, living her eternal life among enemies. In their family cemetery. It fucking rubbed me the wrong way. I wanted to burn the motherfucking place down and move her and Mia, my sister, to my own property with a little

chapel and cemetery where they could have peace in their death.

Since they couldn't have it in life. At least Mia and Mother would be together. After all, she always hoped for Mother's salvation. It was for Mia that I'd saved her that day.

I threw a hateful gaze at my father who stood with a smug smirk next to Branka. I just wanted to reach out and choke the life out of him. See the light extinguished from his eyes. I was at Luciano's earlier this week when I got the note. My father was dead and I needed to rush home.

So I did. Only to find my mother dead. I should have known better. The man loved to torment everyone around him. Even when we were kids, he loved to destroy anything good we had. Fashion designs for Mia. Learning self-defense skills for Branka. Building furniture for me. Fuck, he killed everything just to hurt our mother.

Every. Single. Thing. That woman couldn't eat without being tormented.

I closed my eyes, remembering the misery she called her life.

Mother showed up in my bedroom. Her long white nightgown swallowed her frail frame. She never came to my room, so I tensed, watching her warily.

"Come along, Alessandro," she called out, her voice soft. A rare show of emotions shone in her eyes. She looked like a caring, doting mother, ready to take on the world. It shot a warning through my fifteen-year-old brain.

Mother usually stared with an empty gaze at the world, moving through the mechanics of life on a day-to-day basis.

I narrowed my eyes on her. I didn't hate Mother. I felt sorry for her, but I didn't like that she was weak. I found Father extinguishing his cigarette on Branka's little body and Mother just watched him.

She fucking watched him, her gray eyes dull.

"Your sisters are with me."

That had me jumping off my bed and following her. I had outgrown her, my frame already about three inches taller than her. It didn't stop me from wanting a hug. Or comforting words, here and there.

All I got was beatings from Father, his hate constantly staring me in the face. Apathy from Mother, her dead eyes staring everywhere but at me. They both hated me. They hated my sisters too. What had we done to them to deserve it?

The moment we stepped inside the bedroom, Mother shut the door behind me with a soft click. Then she locked it, pulling the key out of the door. My sisters sat on the large bed. Branka was still an infant, her lungs carrying a high-pitch note that pierced through my brain. Mia, who just turned ten yesterday, sat next to her, her eyes wide in fear and her face smeared with tears.

"What's wrong?" I asked her, dread pooling in the pit of my stomach.

"Father burned Branka," Mia rasped, her body shaking.

"He won't hurt us anymore." My mother's voice was eerily calm. The expression on her face was that of a madwoman. She had finally snapped.

Before I could ponder the meaning of her words, she strode in slow, heavy steps towards her dresser while I closed the distance between my sisters and me. Taking Branka into my arms, I cradled her and pulled up the little shirt up to check her wound.

"I-is she gonna die?" Mia's voice shook like a leaf in the wind.

I shook my head. "We have to clean it," I told her and shot to my feet. Mia followed, her auburn mane a mess and her eyes watching me like I was her savior. I fucking failed. I always failed. If I was a savior, I'd have taken my sisters and disappeared.

Forever. Somewhere where nobody would find us.

A simple life. I could fish and hunt, feed them. I was good with building furniture. I could sell it. I could teach my sisters whatever I knew. We'd be safe; we'd be happy.

The smell of smoke filled the room and I whirled around. My mother flicked a box of matches onto the curtains that were already burning and my chest froze.

*We'd burn. She meant to burn **us**.*

"He won't hurt us anymore," she repeated her earlier words and I finally understood the meaning. Branka started to scream again. Mia cried, pale and sweaty, while staring at the flames.

I took Mia's hand in mine and rushed toward the window, dragging her with me. Keeping Branka shielded with my body, I ripped at the curtains, ignoring the pain on my skin. Flames licked at my forearms, my back as I kept Mia and Branka shielded.

"You have to jump," I ordered Mia. She shook her head frantically, while mother sat on the floor. Numb and ready to die. "Now!"

Two stories down to fall. It was our best chance at survival.

She took a step forward, then glanced at me over her shoulder. "I'm right behind you," I assured her.

"What about Mother?" she whispered, her eyes flickering to the broken woman.

"I'll take care of everything."

She jumped. Father's men were already alerted, shouting and screaming filled the night. Keeping Branka out of our mother's reach, I took three steps to her and yanked her with my free hand.

She stumbled, reverting back to her old, empty self. Maybe I should let her burn; let her find peace in death. But I couldn't. I just couldn't.

I pulled her with me, flames quickly spreading and licking at our backs. Once at the window, Mother's eyes met mine.

Dead. She was already dead.

I pushed her out of the window, and I fucking prayed she'd find her peace. She didn't want this anymore.

I jumped out of the window with Branka in my arms. I fell on my back, the wind knocked out of me. The lawn felt hard as a rock, but I knew it saved me from breaking some bones. All that mattered to me was that the baby in my arms was unharmed.

For her, I'd break all my bones.

My eyes flickered to the grave. She held it against me for saving her. For saving Mia and Branka. She didn't have to say it, but I saw it in her eyes. Accusation that I had taken away an escape.

For me, my mother died that night. I had mourned her a long time ago.

Our mother had been a walking corpse for decades. She was too naive and too soft for this world. First, she was deceived by a corrupt, up-and-coming politician who was eyeing the presidency of the United States and couldn't be bothered with a young Irish woman whom he impregnated. And then she was sold by her parents to a sadistic animal.

The dark stone of the chapel matched my mood. Arched windows gleamed with dullness and saints leered down from the top of the building, judging this entire damned family. The setting fit the occasion perfectly.

The gray clouds gathered above our heads, darkening by the minute. The sky was weeping for me because I had no tears to shed. They'd been beaten out of me a long time ago.

My eyes remained on the casket as the ground swallowed it whole, the words of the priest... background noise.

Ashes to Ashes. Dust to dust.

The only words that registered as my mother's body was lowered six feet under.

Branka's tears trickled down her face in silence as her lower lip quivered and she desperately tried to stop it from doing so. She had learned a long time ago to cry in silence. She had learned the lessons no child should ever learn. At least she was spared seeing the things no child should ever see.

I took her hand in mine and squeezed it gently. I could afford to do this now. It has been a while since my old man could overpower me, and since I earned my own money, I'd secured a roof over Branka's head, so she wouldn't have to endure him. My only regret was that I didn't do it earlier.

With a fifteen year difference between us, I should have been able to protect her from the moment she was born. But I wasn't. She had to endure years of our father's brutality. Years of my mother's broken shell. Fucking years of being locked in her room when he decided to beat on our mother. She listened to their screaming matches and mother's wailing, unable to save her.

I failed Branka just as our parents had. I failed Mia who ran off to join the U.S. military just to fucking get away. Maybe that was our family legacy - failing all those whom we loved.

It wasn't until Branka was ten that I pulled her out of that fucked up shit. When I had something to hold over the old man's head. The humiliation he didn't want anyone to know about. That his son's wealth superseded his own by tenfold.

He fucking hated anyone being better than him, especially his bastard son. My eyes darted to him to see him watching Byron. More like, killing him with a glare. My father hated me, but he didn't want the world to know I wasn't biologically his. And having one Ashford too close to me could reveal that. We looked too much alike.

What-the-fuck-ever. As far as I was concerned, neither one of them was my father. Byron could go fuck himself and

find another soul to stalk. I didn't need him here for me. Never did; never would.

My eyes searched the crowd for the daughter of the man who had succeeded in protecting his family. Autumn Michelle Corbin. It was then that I saw *her* and all thoughts of my half-brother Byron crumbled into dust. She was stunning. Her ivory skin. Her raven hair. Lush, plump lips. And those hazel eyes. She hid behind rows of people, leaning against a tree. I couldn't see all of her, but I could see she wasn't crying, nor pretending to be distressed. She was here just for Branka. Though I was surprised her parents let her come.

The cemetery was full of men and women who pretended to know my mother. The very same ones who pretended not to know who or what my father was. They simply didn't care. My mother came from a line of Irish immigrant gangsters so in their minds, my mother deserved what she got.

A cruel and sadistic bastard.

Branka's hand squeezed mine. She was twenty-two, but she still seemed small to me. My six-foot-five to her five-foot-five probably didn't help matters. I let Branka mourn our mother, so she could get the peace she needed.

My eyes flickered to Byron Ashford. My half-brother. Fucking bastard. Always trying to mend what Senator Ashford destroyed. That fucker would never be my father, and I wasn't interested in mending any kind of relationship with the Ashfords.

People whispered that the two of us looked alike. A lot like the old man. Except, I had my mother's eyes. He had his father's. Truthfully, I detested any similarities with the fucker who destroyed my mother. I wouldn't lose any sleep if he died.

The parade of people commenced.

Throwing red roses, my mother's favorite, onto her grave. Offering condolences. Moving on to go back to their

petty little lives. They were like flies on shit, hungry for drama and fake with their sympathies.

Byron didn't bring a red rose. Instead, he threw a white lilac. The damn bastard always had to be different. I wondered if white lilacs represented purity and innocence. Nothing with Byron was an accident.

He stopped in front of me and Branka. His gaze flicked up and caught Branka's who watched him curiously.

"Alessio and Branka, my condolences," Byron offered, his eyes returning to me.

My jaw tightened, words intended for him burning my throat. This wasn't the place nor the time. I'd prefer not to see the bastard ever again.

"Thank you, Mister—" Branka didn't know our complicated family history. I'd protected her from that clusterfuck. I failed to protect her from our father when she was little, but I was all grown now, and I'd use merciless methods to protect my family.

"Byron Ashford," my half-brother answered, more than willing to prolong this dialogue.

I shoved my hand into my pants pocket. "Thank you for coming," I dismissed him in a cold tone.

Branka's gray eyes, so similar to mine, furrowed and darted to me, then to Byron and back to me.

Without another word, Byron tilted his head and disappeared. But the persistent bastard would be back. He always came back. Like a bad fucking case of herpes.

The crowds dwindled to fewer and fewer people. My eyes kept returning to the woman with hazel eyes that fascinated me.

For four years, I worked to forget the image of her. The innocence standing amidst pink, frilly bed sheets in front of ruthlessness. And she'd refused to cower. Her eyes met mine and a soft exhale parted her lips and a flush colored her cheeks.

She remembered me. It was in the flicker of those greenish hazel eyes. Chemistry and tension roped us in, the invisible strings wrapping around us, and I knew this time I'd have her.

The moments stretched into eternity and, as if she could see the resolution in my eyes, Autumn averted her gaze.

Something told me I had never stood a chance against this woman. Everything in the last four years led us here, to this very moment.

Her parents would come after me but they'd never win. She'd been mine from the moment we locked gazes. As if she could hear my thoughts, Autumn slid another glance my way. Hesitation. Caution. Fear?

Ironically, she stood with Cassio and Luca King, although she didn't speak to them. Her wary gaze was on me and the two of them. Rightly so. We were all killers, shaped by our fathers and circumstances.

Another couple came up, murmuring their condolences. I didn't even bother acknowledging them. All my focus was on the young woman with raven black hair and the strangest hazel eyes I had ever encountered. The girl that shoved me out of her room four years ago. The first person, never mind a girl, to stand up to me.

Soon, it was just my bastard father, Branka, and I, while Autumn, Cassio, and Luca stood to the side. Cassio and Luca already offered their condolences and they remained in a show of support for me.

I was certain Autumn remained for Branka, although she looked nervous. Her watchful gaze darted between me, my father, to the King brothers, and then back to me.

Good instincts, I mused.

She shifted from one foot to the other, her fingers clutching the red rose so tightly, her knuckles turned white. She wouldn't approach us, I'd stake my life on it.

"Is it okay if I go?" Branka murmured softly.

“Where?” Our father barked so loud that even Branka’s best friend jumped.

“Go ahead,” I urged her.

“I’m her father, not you,” Father hissed but I ignored him. If the fucker didn’t die soon, I’d kill him myself. In fact, right now might be an opportune time since we were at the cemetery already. Push him into a grave and let him rot, like the damn worm he was.

Without a backward glance, Branka rushed to her friend. Autumn smiled at her and wrapped her into a hug.

“Want to come to my place?” I could hear her soft voice travel over the breeze. It was exactly as I remembered it. “Maman said she’ll have your favorite dessert. She’s buying.”

Branka nodded, while her lip quivered and she no longer tried to hide it as she did around my father. Even me.

Autumn’s eyes flickered and our gazes met. One fraction of a moment, turning into so many moments that made me wish to make her mine now. I watched as Autumn’s eyes changed from hazel brown to green so vibrant that I had to blink to ensure I was seeing it right.

Her gaze left me and landed on my father. Instantly, her eyes changed to brown.

Her eyes changed with her emotions, I realized. In all my thirty-five years I had never seen anything like that. The first time I saw her, they didn’t change so drastically, and I thought it was a play of light, but today, away from the safe haven of her bedroom, the change in color was more drastic.

Turning around and without any acknowledgement to any of the most lethal men currently in this city that stood in this graveyard, the two women headed away from us and towards the little beat up Volkswagen bug.

Meeting Autumn Corbin was the best thing that could have happened to my sister.

Me, not so much. Because the vision of that body in some white panties and bra was seared into my mind like a fucking tattoo.

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CHAPTER 3

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AUTUMN



I spent the entire night tossing and turning.

Branka's sleeping face, smeared with tears, rested against the pillows. She slept in my bed, just like so many times before during our high school years. She even had her own room here, although she rarely stayed in it. My parents never allowed me to spend the night at Branka's home. I could understand it now, but back then I didn't. But my best friend never minded and preferred to spend the night away from home so it worked out.

Slipping out of the bed, I shuffled quietly down the stairs and into the kitchen.

My mother's scolding look first thing this morning wasn't good news.

"Maman," I groaned before she could even open her mouth.

Her hands came to her hips and her brows furrowed even further.

I sighed. "Here we go," I murmured. "Can I at least get a cup of coffee before we get started?"

I turned around and started working the fancy cappuccino machine my mother insisted she needed. Because she was a true French woman, she'd say. Personally, I thought Italians preferred to drink cappuccinos. But what did I know?

Before step one of the fancy coffee machine was performed, Maman started ranting.

"Autumn, ma chérie, you know your père doesn't like for you to spend time around the Russo men. Or any of their friends."

I shook my head but didn't bother glancing behind me. She'd see me rolling my eyes and another string of ranting would follow.

"I went to a funeral," I explained. "For Branka. She lost her mother. I didn't speak a word with her family."

"But a whole flight from California to Quebec with Cassio and Luca King," she retorted, a slight panic in her voice.

"They mainly kept to themselves," I muttered. "Branka and I slept."

"Oh, mon Dieu." I didn't need to turn around to know she was waving her hands dramatically. "They could have forced themselves on you, ma chérie." Another annoying groan slipped through my lips while I rolled my eyes vigorously. "Don't you roll your eyes at me, Autumn Michelle Corbin." Of course she'd know I was rolling my eyes. She could probably see them in the back of my head. "You and Branka are close and I want you to be there for her. But you have to be smart about it. Always be alert around men like that."

I was tempted to roll my eyes again but I didn't.

"Understood and I will. But let's not exaggerate. They didn't force themselves on us," I told her calmly. "Now let's not ruin my last week before I go on the road."

A deep, exaggerated sigh left my mother's lips. "How is Branka?"

I glanced up at the ceiling, as if I could see her from here. She was finally resting. It wasn't until the early hours of the morning that she finally calmed down enough to fall asleep.

"She's upset," I answered slowly. "She just lost her mother." *And she's scared of her father.*

But there was no way I'd say those words out loud. It'd bring another round of her ranting.

"Is she going to stay with her father?" It was clear by my mother's tone that she thought it was a bad idea. "You should tell her to stay with her brother."

Her brother. Alessio Russo. Alessandro. God, that name alone was so sexy.

Over the last four years, I'd convinced myself he wasn't that good looking. But then I saw him yesterday, and just like before, when our eyes met, he held my gaze captive. The cemetery was full of people but Alessio dominated the entire damn city, never mind that little cemetery.

Branka's brother was larger than life.

During the entire service, I had the urge to keep my eyes averted, away from him. Yet, they always landed back on him. Like a magnet that drew you in. Even with a yard of distance between us, his presence invaded my personal space. He stood tall, towering over people.

Impenetrable. Unemotional.

And the moment his attention honed in on me, my skin buzzed with something familiar. Something that hadn't happened since the last time I saw him.

But being on Alessio Russo's radar should be the last thing I wanted. The last thing I needed. He was a predator and I'd be his prey. Consequences would be... pleasurable, though. I was certain of it.

"Autumn?" My mother's voice penetrated my thoughts and I whirled around to find my mother still standing in the same spot.

"Hmmm?"

"So what are her plans?" she questioned.

I blinked in confusion. "Whose?"

"I asked you if Branka will stay with her brother?" My mother's tone turned slightly agitated.

"I think so," I rumbled.

"She could stay here," she offered.

I didn't think her big brother would ever allow that but I didn't say that. Instead, I just answered, "I'll let her know."

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CHAPTER 4

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ALESSIO



Autumn Corbin.

Four years wasn't long enough to forget her.

I kept my distance. Fifteen years between us was too much to entertain anything with her. Not to mention, her parents detested the Russo family. The only reason they allowed Branka into their circle was because Autumn put her foot down and refused to turn her back on her.

Admittedly, that made me like her even before I met her.

Cassio and Luca King, and Nico Morrelli all stood around my office.

"Has Luciano worked things out with Grace?" I asked, leaning back in my chair.

"They will," Cassio assured. He was the most optimistic one of us.

"So the raven-haired girl," Luca started and I knew the next words would make me want to punch him. "Is she single?"

"No," I gritted.

Luca chuckled like it was the funniest goddamn thing he had ever heard. "Does she know that?" he asked.

I flipped him the bird.

Luca opened his mouth but his brother quickly shut him down. "Jesus, Luca. The man just buried his mother, let it go."

“Shouldn’t touch a young thing like that,” Luca drawled, pouring himself another glass of scotch. Cassio warning him probably gave him the extra boost. “I’m younger than you. We’re probably more compatible.”

“Luca, I swear to God, you touch her and I’ll enjoy sawing your dick off with a dull knife,” I growled.

“Ouch, that’ll hurt,” Nico chimed in, glaring at Luca and mouthing for him to shut the fuck up. Then his eyes returned to me. “Have you thought about Branka and her future?”

I dug a cigarette out of my drawer. The truth was that I had, but I kept pushing it off. I wanted a happy life for Branka. Full of love and laughter. Something that she always talked about with envy when describing the Corbin household.

“I have,” I admitted. “Considering how fucked up most arranged marriages are, I’m a bit reluctant.”

Cassio lit up a cigar. “I don’t blame you. Have you checked into the Brennan family? Liam’s son is decent, and if he’s anything like his father, he’d be a good connection to have.”

“Killian Brennan?” I questioned. He nodded. “I’ll look into him.”

Just not too fast. My sister was still too young.

The irony didn’t escape me though. Branka and Autumn were exactly the same age.

Yet, I didn’t hesitate to secure Autumn for myself by reaching out to the head of the Corsican mafia four years ago.

Hypocrisy at its peak.

WE STRODE TO LA PETITE, a bar that an old friend owned. The first woman I ripped out of the clutches of traffickers.

She waved us over. She always kept one table secured for us.

"Alessio," she greeted me, barely a hint of a smile on her lips.

"Fleur, how are you?" My eyes roamed over the crowd. "It's busy tonight, huh?"

"You'll see why soon." Her voice held a note of smugness to it and I cocked my eyebrow. But before I could question her, she turned her attention to Cassio, Luca, and Nico. "Gentlemen. Drinks are on the house."

I chuckled. "Business must be good."

"Today definitely is," she retorted, glancing over her shoulder. Her gaze was focused on the furthest corner of the bar where the grand piano stood. There was nobody there. "We have live entertainment. They're taking a break."

"That must be some entertainment."

Another smug smirk. "It is."

"I'll have my usual please," I ordered.

Fleur turned her attention to Cassio, Luca, and Nico. The three of them recited their orders, and leaving us to it, she headed back to her spot behind the bar.

The four of us sat back into the comfortable leather booth seats. It didn't take long for drinks to appear in front of us when the first tunes hit the notes on the piano.

The crowd turned to face the corner where the piano stood. The lights dimmed and a soft, melodious voice came through the microphone.

"Okay, peeps. How about something slower?" The voice was one I'd recognize anywhere and my head snapped in its direction.

Autumn Corbin sat behind the piano, her ebony hair pulled up in a high ponytail. It highlighted those high cheekbones, large almond shaped eyes and those plump lips that begged to be kissed.

Branka sat next to her, but knowing my sister couldn't play the piano, I was certain that her friend was leading the show. The two of them shared a glance whispering something to each other.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen," Autumn drawled and even from here, I could see her lips curving into a mischievous smile. "We took your requests earlier. The rest of the night is for us. Because guess what?"

"What?" the crowd responded in unison.

"My bestie is taking a year off to be my sidekick."

A roar rolled through the air. It turned out my sister and her best friend were frequent attendees here, as their names were chanted by the crowd.

Branka raised her hand to calm the rowdy attendees.

"Unpaid assistant," my sister clarified, then elbowed her best friend. "I demanded a promotion."

My little sister was the happiest when around her best friend and her family. Not that I could blame her. Our own family was fucked up beyond recognition.

"Pfft," Autumn tsked. "Who needs money when we're going to save the world?"

The two giggled and the tunes started. "So my awesome peeps, we'll start with my man, Jaymes Young."

"Is he good looking?" Branka's whisper could be heard through the microphone.

"No clue," Autumn replied, shrugging her shoulders. "But that voice can whisper anything to me. All. Night. Long."

The audience's chuckle filled the air. The two of them felt at home here. Fleur had often let them come here even during their high school years. She had given them reprieve, but not alcohol.

Autumn started singing. Her voice was soft, the kind that sent goosebumps rolling down your skin. Each word, each emotion. You felt it as if it was your own. It didn't help that the song "I'll Be Good" by Jaymes Young was relatable,

charged with the very emotions and words that could easily reflect my life.

At certain spots of the song, Branka's voice chimed in perfectly, which told me those two frequently played together. I listened to her sing, mesmerized, just as most of the men in this club.

Everyone in the room faded into the background as I watched her play with a dreamy smile, her fingers flying over the keyboard. I knew from my background check into Autumn's parents that her mother used to be a musician. Obviously, Autumn had inherited her mother's talent.

"She's pretty good," Nico remarked, side-eyeing me. "For someone so young."

"Good looking too," Luca chimed in, as always egging me on.

I flipped them both a middle finger, keeping my gaze on Autumn's face that lit up with each note she played. The song switched. The tunes turned even more serious and sad. I had no idea if it was a song by the same singer, but it seemed too serious of a song to be listened to by a pair almost twenty-two year olds.

Autumn's inky black hair reflected the lights of the bar. Her posture was perfect as she moved along with the music, the curve of her neck exposed, tempting me.

And I watched her, savoring the moment. Imagining how she'd feel underneath me.

Autumn's eyes, now brown, flickered to Branka. A single tear rolled down my sister's face and my chest squeezed. I'd failed her. My parents failed her. I should have better protected her from my father. Both Mother and her.

"Too sad," some dick shouted. If he didn't watch it, he'd end up six feet under. That'd be sad.

Autumn flipped him a bird without missing a beat and continued on. How fucking appropriate that Autumn, at that very moment, sang the words 'six feet under.'

A terse nod by my sister and she leaned her shoulder onto her best friend. She was her rock. Not me. Not our family. Autumn and her family gave her what I couldn't. Love and warmth.

The ounce of decency I possessed warned I shouldn't touch her best friend. She wanted to save the world. I had been destroying it for years. Distribution of arms and drugs was definitely a far cry from saving it.

Yet, even as I had those thoughts, I knew I'd never let her go. After all, it was the reason for my contract. To ensure she'd be mine.

Now that she was back and grown up, nothing would save her from me.

There was no going back.

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CHAPTER 5

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AUTUMN



Branka and I against the world.
Another couple of days and we'd hit the road, and it felt right to take the next step together.

Two drinks appeared in front of us. Fleur smiled at us and mouthed, "Non-alcoholic."

Branka and I shared a glance, then rolled our eyes, but we still murmured our thanks. I was about to stop our playing, but Branka leaned over and whispered, "One more. Please."

I went through various songs I liked in my mind and finally settled on one. "Okay, one last song and then the two of us have to go." Some members of the audience protested, others murmured they weren't ready to be depressed tonight by our choices in song. "Last sad song of the night."

My fingers moved across the ivory keys as the tune of Halsey's "Sorry" began to build and like always, goosebumps traveled down my body. Maman said it was a sign of the sensitive, artistic soul. Father's lips would curve into a smile, but he wouldn't laugh. He'd never laugh at Maman. Neither would I, but I wasn't like her.

She was too soft, too romantic. Father appeased her because he loved her so much, but I learned the two of

them were an exception in this life. Love like theirs was rare, so I was thankful I got some of my father's realism.

But it didn't stop me from wishing for a great love story like my parents had.

The last note of the song traveled through the air and I realized the entire bar was still, everyone's eyes on me. I let out a soft exhale and smiled.

"The show is over," I announced. "No more sad songs." Then I reached for my drink. Branka was already sipping on hers. "Fleur, just so you know," I said into the microphone, raising my glass and clinking it against the invisible in the air. "We just graduated and have had our share of alcohol. But thank you for keeping us sober and for the apple juice."

Laughter broke through the room.

Fleur's lips tugged up. "I know what you two do when you drink, and we don't need a riot tonight, girls."

"I'll buy you drinks." A slightly drunken voice broke through the chuckle. A man stumbled over to us, his hand reaching for Branka and me. She was quick to stretch backwards to avoid his hand. I wasn't. I shot up but not before his hand took hold of my ponytail and pulled it tightly. "For a kiss," he slurred. "And a peek of what's between your legs."

"In your fucking dreams," I sneered. My hands clutched his wrist, my nails digging into his skin as I stared at the man in disbelief. What a creeper!

"Let. Me. Go." I gritted while he leered at me. My skin crawled with him too close to me. He looked like a dead beat with a muscle shirt on and ripped jeans. Balding head with bushy brows that glistened with sweat.

Instead he tugged on my ponytail even harder, causing me to lose balance and fall backwards.

"Let her go and you'll only lose your hand. If not, you'll be dead by morning."

My eyes whipped in the direction of the deep voice. Where the hell did *he* come from?

Alessio Russo stood behind the drunk, muscle shirt guy, the disparity between the two so obvious. Alessio towered above him in his suit, looking drop-dead gorgeous. Like a dream. Geez, I was drooling.

But who wouldn't be? Alessio Russo in a suit was drool-worthy.

Every time I'd seen him he'd worn a suit, and it made me wonder if the guy ever wore anything else. Maybe he was born in a suit.

Alessio's posture was calm, but underneath it was something harsh and ruthless. The look in his eyes could freeze a volcano. Yet, I was on fire. Just his presence erupted an inferno within me, and I didn't know how to extinguish it. My eyes flickered to Alessio's hand wrapped around the drunk's throat. Tanned skin, strong fingers and my heart drummed with unnatural speed as I wondered how they'd feel wrapped around my own throat.

Jesus Christ!

I was losing my mind. If Alessio Russo had his hand wrapped around my throat, it meant I was enroute to being a dead woman. So yeah... there was that.

"Whoa, where did you come from?" Branka voiced my thoughts.

Her big brother ignored her question and folded the guys' fingers back, loosening his hold on my hair. The crack of the bones echoed in the air and my eyes widened. My mouth parted in shock and I glanced at Branka who didn't seem shocked at all.

Was her brother mad? He couldn't do shit like that to people.

Taking a step towards him, I jerked on his arm and gripped the sleeve. "Hey, you can't do that."

His granite, hard expression didn't flicker as he inclined his head. "You'd rather me let him harass you?"

I swallowed with a gulp and shook my head, the tips of my ponytail brushing against my bare shoulders. This man was formidable, scary, and fascinating all in one. Let's not forget drop dead gorgeous.

For barely a fraction of a second, his eyes lowered to my lips and then back up. His gray eyes held mine captive as a shadow passed through them, watching me with an icy gaze that threatened to steal my breath away.

Instinctively, I took a step back and my hand that held his forearm mere seconds ago fell to my side. The loss hit me instantly, causing me to sway on my feet. My eyes flickered to my fingers that had held his sleeve as if I expected to find something that would explain this feeling. This attraction. Whatever the hell this was.

Alessio's eyes darted to his sister. "You and your friend go and sit down at my table."

Both of us followed his gaze to a table in the far corner. The table that was always empty when we came here. But not today. The two men that came to get us at Berkeley sat there, as well as another man.

Branka and I shared a glance, both of our brows furrowed. The flight back from Berkeley was uncomfortable enough. Cassio King barely spoke a word, while his eyes whispered of darkness that I never wanted to experience. And his brother, Luca, was just as scary, but he hid it behind his snarky comments and seemingly laid back attitude.

"Ummm, we'll just go," I muttered, my throat suddenly dry.

"You walk to that table and sit down." The cold, measured tone of Branka's brother would whip fear into anyone. Never mind me.

Branka already headed toward the table, while I remained immobile in my spot, staring at him. Who in the hell did he think he was? I couldn't let the bastard talk to

me like that. My shoulders straightened and I glared at him, hiding my fear behind fake bravado.

"You can't tell me what to do," I hissed and surprise coasted through his eyes. "And secondly, I'm only going to sit over there because of Branka. Next time you think about bossing me around, think again."

I glared at him, then whipped around giving him my back. With my head held high, I strutted towards the table where Cassio, Luca, and another guy sat, then flopped my ass next to Branka.

Okay, so it wasn't smart to talk like that to someone who was rumored to have connections to the mafia. Fuck rumors. I'd stake my life that he was the mafia. After all, Cassio King sat in front of me.

"Your brother is a dick," I gritted under my breath to Branka. I wasn't even certain why I was pissed off. Maybe it was the fact that I got all flustered around him. Or the fact that my body heated up with an unfamiliar, aching need that I knew deep down only he could sate.

Branka shrugged her slim shoulders. "That guy went too far. Alessio doesn't like it."

"I could have handled him." Lie. I would have called the police, but whatever.

"How are you this evening, ladies?" Luca's tone rang with sarcasm. "Causing trouble again, I see."

Branka and I narrowed our gazes on him, but neither one of us answered. I glanced over my shoulder. Alessio was no longer in the same spot. In fact, he was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the guy that dared to approach us.

"Great singing voice," one of them complimented, but I was too busy fuming.

"Thanks," I muttered, ignoring all three of the men.

"Why are you all here anyhow?" Branka questioned, glaring at the three men seated in front of us. My eyes darted curiously to the men. They shrugged as if they were one. Okay, a tad bit freaky.

It was Luca that finally answered. "We came for drinks and this isn't your place... So- "

"Well, we always come here," Branka sneered. "Go drink somewhere else in Montréal."

"Considering your brother owns fifty percent of this joint, why would we put money in someone else's pocket?"

"Huh?" Branka and I stammered.

"Alessandro owns this place?" Branka questioned.

"That is what I said," Luca repeated slowly, like he thought we were dumb. "Alessio owns this bar."

Both Branka's and my mouth formed a silent O. Neither one of us knew that little detail and we visited this place frequently during our high school years. Fleur had never mentioned it.

Needless to say, this would not be my choice of hangout in the future. Though I had to wonder how come we never ran into Alessio here before.

As if on cue, Branka's brother showed up out of nowhere and sat down in the empty spot next to me with lethal grace.

"Hello," I murmured, absorbing his heat. That man was a walking furnace.

He sat close to me, his muscled thigh brushing against my leg and my whole body sizzled. The butterflies in my stomach worked overtime and it took all my will not to scoot away from him. I needed space so I could breathe easier.

This section, despite being part of the bar, had a quiet ambiance to it. The circle-shaped booth had a sheer golden curtain that allowed all the men to see the bar but it afforded them privacy.

Fleur showed up too and offered us apologetic smiles. "Are you two okay?" Both of us nodded our answer. "I'll bring you all another drink."

With Alessio so close to me, it was hard to find my voice. My heart raced in my chest and my skin burned like it was

on fire. He was too close, yet not close enough. I couldn't remain around this guy or I'd do something stupid.

"Alessio, you own this place?" Branka blurted out, her tone slightly accusing.

"Yes."

A clipped answer while Alessio's eyes remained glued to me. His expression was disinterested, but his eyes darkened to a molten silver. He hid it underneath all his ruthlessness and darkness that consumed any room he lingered in.

And the most peculiar thought shattered through me. *This man is broken.*

"I don't think you remember my best friend," Branka continued. "Autumn Corbin."

"Autumn," he repeated, his tone like sweet liquor that was sure to leave a bitter aftertaste.

Alessio Russo was the kind of man who had women falling at his feet. Like he was a god. Well, he wasn't. The jerk didn't even remember me. Not that I was bitter about it or anything.

He was a gentleman dressed in a Brioni suit. A savage. A demon in disguise.

Something I didn't need in my life.

But fuck, I wanted it. *Him.*

Why? I had no fucking idea. There was just something about his stone-cold gaze that set an inferno ablaze inside me. Through every single inch of me.

"How is the photography coming along?" he asked and I gave him a slow, plain blink. I was surprised he knew what I studied.

"That's an odd thing to study," Cassio chimed in, studying me curiously.

"Why is that?" I asked, tilting my chin up.

"Because all you have to do is press a button and you take pictures," Luca commented, rolling his eyes. "You don't need a fucking degree in it."

"There is a degree for etiquette and social communication," I grumbled. "You could use it. And then I'll talk to you about my photography." *Dumbass*.

Though I didn't have a death wish so the last word remained sealed behind my smart lips.

"Branka sent some of your photographs," Alessio said, something ghosting through his eyes. But it was gone too fast for me to catch the emotion. "They are really good."

Falling. Falling. Fallen. God, was it that easy for me to fall for someone?

The deep, smooth timbre of his voice sent a warm shiver down my spine, while I held my breath. I eventually took a deep breath in and released it. It was just the way I remembered it that first day I met him. When I shoved him out of my bedroom and all the while my thighs clenched with this ache that I knew only he'd be able to sate.

I mentally slapped myself. It did nothing to sober me up from this lust-filled haze. God, why was he so damn sexy? And hot? That dark expression on his face and ghosts lurking in his eyes tempted me. I wanted to explore what he hid underneath that ruthless persona and ease all his pain.

Did it make sense? Absolutely not.

"Thank you." It was the most intelligent response I could come up with. *Lovely*, I thought dryly to myself.

"You'll have to share your work with us," Cassio remarked. "If there is something fitting my style, I'll buy a photo. Before you become famous."

A soft breath of air left my lungs. "I'm not sure that I'll be famous. But you'll be sure to see my photos in *National Geographic*."

"Ohhh, wild nature photos," Luca mused.

I just couldn't deal with that guy, so I just rolled my eyes.

"Any photo will be good coming from Autumn. Even the one taken of Luca King... dead. It could be your obituary

photo," Alessio remarked, shutting down Luca's smart mouth.

And I swooned for the man even more.

He trapped me with the gravity of his gaze, watching me. I got a sense he could see every corner of my soul. I was an open book to this man, while he was a mystery to me. The one I wanted to solve.

"So *National Geographic*, huh?" he asked since I remained quiet. I exhaled a deep breath and nodded. The corner of his mouth tugged upward. I amused him. Wonderful. "What's the first assignment?"

"Kuala Lumpur." This time I smiled too, that dreamy feeling swelling in my chest. "First stop, Batu Caves. It's over four hundred million years old."

"Oh lovely, a history buff," Luca muttered.

"Shut the fuck up," Branka snapped.

"Better watch it," the third man remarked. He was at the funeral earlier too. Alessio's friend, I guessed. "Or you'll end up six feet under."

Alessio didn't spare either one of them a glance. I dropped my gaze to my hands, his cologne seeping into every single pore of me. We might as well be alone because my body was only attuned to him.

Like the entire world ceased to exist, and he was the only human that mattered.

It was petrifying, thrilling and exhilarating all at once. I had never felt such attraction towards anyone. The last time I felt my blood buzzing like this was the day I first saw him.

I swallowed nervously, flicking a gaze to my best friend, and the rest of the men around the table. Could they feel the air sizzling?

I resisted the urge to shift in my seat while Alessio adamantly stared down at me. His eyes moved slowly down my body, leaving a trail of fire erupting in its wake. Suddenly, I regretted wearing a short dress. I needed to

hide, cover every inch of my skin because I feared he'd be able to see what he was doing to me.

My fingers curled into my palm, nails digging into my flesh, as I fought the urge to cover up. He was calm and collected while I burned with a craving that threatened to turn me to ash. A pulse throbbed between my legs, causing my thighs to clench.

Alessio's gaze flickered and I knew, just knew, he noticed my movement. When his lips tipped up, I got my confirmation. He read me like an open book. Something dark and hot lurked in his stormy eyes that suddenly didn't look so cold.

I gulped, attempting to calm my racing heart.

Casually, yet I'd bet my life that it was on purpose, Alessio leaned back and rested his arm behind me. He hadn't touched me, but my skin tingled like he had. The heat of his body snaked through the space between us. His spicy, sandalwood scent enveloped me and even that turned me on. Fireworks exploded through my bloodstream.

I pretended to be unaffected, but my heart thundered so hard, I was certain everyone could see it beating out of my chest.

Fuck, why didn't I sit on the other side of Branka?

Alessio was forbidden fruit. My father, being an ex-special agent, nor my maman would ever approve of someone like him. They wanted me to meet someone safe and grounded, not dark and consuming like Satan's spawn.

After all, Father called Alessio's father the true Satan. Not that he ever elaborated why he assigned him that name. It seemed appropriate considering how scary and cruel he was.

"So what are your plans for the night?" Luca questioned.

"Nothing," my friend and I murmured.

"It doesn't look like nothing," the third guy remarked. What was it with these men? Was the requirement to be friends 'super hotness' or something?

"And who are you?" Branka questioned, glaring at the third man.

"Branka, that's Nico Morrelli," Alessio clarified.

The name didn't mean anything to me but it meant something to Branka because she scoffed and muttered under her breath, "Another damn mobster."

Fleur was back at that moment with our drinks. "Gentlemen." She placed their drinks in front of them. "Autumn and Branka, sparkling water for the two of you."

"We had better drinks at college," Branka grumbled. I agreed, but with Alessio's closeness I was so parched that I grabbed my drink and downed it in one gulp.

"Thirsty?" I felt Alessio's hot breath on my neck, and it took all my control not to jump up.

Anxiety and something unfamiliar buzzed beneath my skin.

I had to get out of here. Or I'd give in to temptation. I teetered on the edge, needing to touch this man who'd consume me for so long. He looked like a man who'd promise heaven and deliver it. Either that or the most delicious sin.

I shot up, unable to handle this tension anymore. If I remained here for another second, I'd burst into flames and do something there'd be no coming back from.

Everyone's eyes landed on me, but I locked them on Branka.

"It's getting late," I murmured.

And just like he was my magnet, my eyes returned to Alessio. That perfectly chiseled and symmetrical face that I itched to explore with my mouth. I wondered if he was clean cut underneath that suit or was there some bad boy ink hiding. Like his friend Cassio.

"Cassio, can you take Branka to my place?" Alessio asked.

"Ugh, I was hoping to spend the night with Autumn," Branka retorted dryly.

“Not tonight.”

I slid a glance to my friend, but she seemed resolved in accepting her older brother’s demand.

“We’ll touch base tomorrow,” Branka said.

“Sounds good.”

By the time I exited the bar, Cassio had already headed to drop off Branka. Luca and Nico remained behind, while Alessio fell into step with me.

I dared a side glance at him.

Alessio moved quietly and lethally next to me, darkness swallowing his every move. His presence dominated the space around us and he seemed to steal oxygen. Did it bother him? Not one bit.

“Why are you following me?” I asked him, my tone slightly breathless. My goal was to get distance between us, not to have him with me until my Uber showed up.

“I’m taking you home,” he drawled, never stopping.

My steps faltered and I narrowed my eyes on him. “I didn’t ask you to.”

“You didn’t.” It was obvious that man never had to explain himself to anyone. He paused and turned around, cocking his eyebrow. “You coming?”

My mind immediately shot to filthy images of Alessio and how he’d make me cum. My cheeks turned crimson. They had to be totally melting. The only saving grace was the cover of the night.

A dark chuckle left his lips. “Not to worry, Autumn. When you cum, I won’t have to ask you. I’ll know by your screams.”

Holy. Mother. Of. God.

My cheeks blazed and a flush covered every inch of my skin. Forget Jaymes Young. Alessio’s voice and his words would be every woman’s dream of pillow talk. He took a step closer to me and his scent enveloped me. In the middle of a parking lot, the light warm breeze whipped through the air, but all I could feel and smell was him.

Spice. Sandalwood. Heat.

This man would devastate me if I wasn't careful. And still like a moth to the flame I went.

MY MOTHER always said that life was made up of moments you grabbed.

You made your life happen. Nobody else would do it for you. It was right at that moment my decision was made up.

"C'mon Autumn," Alessio nudged me towards his sports car. He opened the door for me like a true gentleman, and I had to swallow a tiny sigh. That was one thing about college boys. They had no manners, and I was a sucker for them.

"Ugh, Alessandro," I muttered as I lowered myself into his sports car. "Can't you have a normal car that sits off the ground?"

His chest shook as a chuckle broke loose. "I like my car."

"I think your tires are flat," I muttered under my breath.

He shut the door and went around to get into the driver's seat. As his car roared to life, I sat in the fancy, red Maserati next to my friend's much older brother, all I could smell was him. His car smelled like expensive leather and him. And the close proximity made my mind hazy with an intensity of desire I had never tasted.

"Buckle up," he ordered, buckling his own seatbelt.

"Okay, Daddy," I muttered, rolling my eyes, and reaching for the seatbelt. Of course, I wouldn't admit to him that I always put a seatbelt on. He just rattled me and left me drooling after him. "Didn't know you were law enforcement."

"If I'm old, you're a baby," he mocked. "And if you don't buckle up, I'll be forced to teach you a lesson no law enforcement ever could."

I didn't like his mocking tone. I was almost full-blown fanning myself here and he was calling me a baby.

"Like what?" I retorted back sarcastically. "Put me in timeout?"

"My kind of timeout would involve you bent over the bed and your ass bare for spanking."

My pussy clenched and I rubbed my legs together in shock at such a response. The image that picture painted had my panties soaking wet. I should be embarrassed at such a reaction.

I wasn't. I wanted to hear more filthy talk from him.

I watched those strong, veiny fingers resting on the wheel. I tried hard to focus on that strange ring he wore. The letter 'A' with a skull, but my eyes kept flickering back to his forearms and then his hands that I knew, just knew, would feel so good on me.

It took everything in me not to reach out and put them on my bare thighs. It was a carnal need that demanded I feel him on my skin. On every inch of my body.

"You could never keep up with me, old man," I breathed, my heart drumming.

Crossing my legs, I watched him flick a glance at my bare thighs.

"You're playing with fire, love," he drawled, a hint of delicious darkness in his voice. A muscle in his jaw ticked, as if he fought for control.

I shifted in my seat and my skirt hiked even higher.

"Ooops," I murmured.

Those beautiful lips curved up into a devastating smile. "I'm going to have fun playing with you, my little toy."

CHAPTER 6

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ALESSIO



Fuck me.

Or I'd fuck her. Yeah, that was a much better plan. She had gone and done a one-eighty on me.

I had expected we'd find ourselves here. I had not anticipated Autumn playing the seductress.

She wasn't very experienced. I made sure boys stayed away from her for her last four years in college. Because I'd wanted her for myself. My brain stopped working the moment I saw her four years ago. Half-naked temptation sent to destroy me.

Autumn's movements were too jerky as she moved those gorgeous legs of hers, but it was an even bigger turn on than anything I ever had before.

She smelled delicious. Like cinnamon, apples, and fresh fallen leaves. Like fall. Her name suited her.

It was hard to keep my eyes off her. She wore a red mini skirt that barely covered her thighs, and a slinky black top that played peekaboo, giving a tiny glimpse of her breast each time she moved.

"Is it true you keep a flask in your suit?" Autumn asked out of nowhere. I cocked my eyebrow. How did the minx know that? Her lips curved into a mischievous smile. "Branka told me."

“And how does my sister know?” I inquired. Not that it was a secret. Then I remembered there was a period where my flasks kept disappearing. “Did you and my sister steal my flasks?”

She shrugged. “Maybe once or twice.”

I shook my head and my lips tugged up. She had to be the only woman, apart from my sister, who didn’t seem scared of me. The attraction that sizzled between us frightened her, but otherwise, she didn’t seem to fear me at all.

I dug out my flask and handed it to her.

“Bottoms up?” She grinned, then winked.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” I grumbled. It was a hundred-year-old cognac and strong as fuck.

Autumn tipped back her head and swallowed. I watched her throat work as she swallowed her drink and my dick pulsed against the zipper of my suit pants.

I wondered how many men had tasted those plump lips. My grip tightened around the wheel. Just the idea of another man touching her made me want to go on a murder spree. The obsession over this woman would be my doom.

Did it stop me? Fuck no.

I was aware of her eyes studying me, curiosity and excitement in those hazel greens. Green equals lust. Duly noted.

I returned my eyes back to the road, and all the while, I sensed her gaze on me.

“Autumn, if you have something to say, you better say it.”

From the peripheral, I noticed her cheeks color with a pink blush. I couldn’t help but to imagine how far I could make her blush spread. She nibbled on her lower lip. It seemed to be a nervous habit but sexy as fuck.

“Have you had many women?” she blurted out the question like she was scared she’d lose her courage halfway through.

“Why?”

She shrugged her slim shoulders. “I’ll tell you my number if you tell me yours.”

My teeth clenched and my jaw ticked. If I found out her number, I’d demand the names and then I’d hunt those boys down. Jealousy ate at me. Who in the fuck dared to touch her? I ensured for the past four years that all her dates went nowhere.

It didn’t take much to dissuade those boys to stay the fuck away from Autumn.

“Better not,” I gritted.

“You have a penthouse right around the corner, don’t you?” she asked curiously.

“And how do you know about my city apartment?”

Her soft chuckle filled the car. “Branka and I snuck into it once.”

Now that was news to me. “You did?”

Her almond shaped hazel eyes met me in a bold stare. “Yes, we did. We convinced your doorman that you sent us to retrieve your wallet.”

“And he bought it?”

She smiled mischievously. “We can be quite convincing when we want to.”

“I bet you can,” I muttered, coming to a stop at a red light. I turned to face her fully. Despite Autumn’s beauty and playing seductress, innocence rolled off her in waves, and it made me a bastard for wanting to take what she had to offer.

If I took a right, I’d be taking her to her house. If I turned left, I’d be heading in the direction of my penthouse. Left was the way to delicious sin.

She held my stare as if she could read my thoughts as I battled with this craving I had for her.

“Take me to your place,” she murmured softly.

“Who said I want you in my place?”

Her slim shoulder shrugged and she turned to face me. Fuck, she looked at me as if I was a god. But I was a demon. A savage in disguise. Would she want me if she knew my history?

I could never go there. Not with her. Not with anyone.

"You did," she answered. She was brave. I liked that about her. There wasn't much I didn't love about her. That sassy mouth of hers. The incredible brain. Her compassion. Fucking everything. "The way you're watching me."

"I don't do lovemaking, Autumn." I offered a final warning. "I fuck. And once we cross that line, there's no turning back."

She tilted her head, her eyes that green hazel that fascinated me. "Let's cross the line then, Alessandro."

Fuck, when she said my name like that, it made me want to pounce on her right away.

The light turned green, and without another thought, I turned left. The rest of the drive we spent in silence but the air was charged with both of our cravings.

In the dark corners secrets lurked.

Hers. Mine. Ours.

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CHAPTER 7

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AUTUMN



I asked Alessio Russo to take me to his penthouse.
Oh. My. Gosh.

Hiding the turmoil inside me, I walked in the direction of the elevator. At his six foot five, it didn't take him long to fall in step with me. Or more like I had to keep my step up with him. At barely five foot seven, I was much shorter than him and still our steps were perfectly synchronized against the marble floors.

His height wasn't a towering, threatening cloud anymore. It was a security blanket wrapped around me, sheltering me.

We stopped by the elevators and faced each other. There were secrets that lingered in those stormy eyes, causing a mild case of breathlessness that had every inch of me craving him.

Ding.

The elevator opened and we stepped inside it. I had never done anything like this. I had never been the seductress, never attempted it until this man. Boys usually approached me, wanted me. So yes, I'd fooled around plenty. I never claimed to be a saint. I just never went all the way.

Goddamn it. Should I rub against him? Should I lean in for a kiss?

His frame heated my skin, and we hadn't even touched yet. Anticipation buzzed underneath my skin, my heart palpitations kicked into overdrive as adrenaline rushed through my veins.

Ding.

The elevator opened to a luxurious penthouse. It was as I remembered it, decorated in flawless design and luxury. The slick black furniture, crisp white walls, not a single personal effect. Yet, it was all him.

Dark. Crisp. Impersonal.

Although, the way he watched me was all kinds of personal. Like I was his already.

"Changing your mind?" My head whipped in his direction, and I realized I hadn't moved. Both of us still stood in the elevator.

"No."

There was no hesitation in my voice nor my heart. I wanted this.

"Good girl."

His eyes and words sent shivers of excitement through me. Somersaults of anticipation played in my stomach. A scorching warmth rolled down my back like a volcano nearing an eruption.

So I took a step, and it felt almost symbolic as I crossed the threshold.

His hand came to my back, then wrapped around my waist, and warmth spread to every single part of my body. From my head down to my toes. My heart hammered so hard, I worried one of my ribs would break.

Then in one swift move, like his control snapped, Alessio grabbed both my wrists and pinned them with one hand above my head and pushed me against a wall.

Heat sizzled across my skin and his mouth brushed against mine. A soft moan escaped me and his lips moved against mine, demanding more. His one hand held my

wrists in a viselike grip while his other roamed over my curves.

I tore my lips from his, breathing heavily. I wanted to say one thing, before I lose myself in him. He jammed his face into my chest and sank his teeth into my flesh.

"Fuck," I gasped. The sharp edge of his teeth was replaced by his tongue and the shiver rolled down my spine.

"Now I marked you," he murmured against my skin. "So everyone knows you're mine."

Oh. My. God.

His mouth latched on to the spot he marked and he sucked.

"Break my heart and I'll fuck you up," I breathed, tilting my head to accommodate him. A simple warning. It didn't mean I didn't want him.

He straightened and met my gaze. "Fair warning," he acknowledged. "Break my heart, and I'll be your worst nightmare."

A terse nod. "I won't," I promised and his hot, hungry mouth was back on mine.

I'm going to do this.

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CHAPTER 8

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ALESSIO



Bringing Autumn to my place was a deliciously bad idea. She was taunting my control with those luminous, almond shaped eyes. Yet, I didn't give two fucks because she was mine.

The moment I touched her soft skin, my control snapped and I had her back against the wall. I took her mouth, sliding my tongue between her soft, luscious lips. Her scent was calming. She smelled like she belonged to me, soothing the broken pieces inside me.

Fuck.

I pressed my nose to her neck, nipping and licking at her soft skin. She moaned and the sound shot straight to my rock hard dick. I inhaled deeply, memorizing her scent.

She was so damn sweet and responsive.

Her soft moans filled the dark penthouse, and it was music to my ears. Rocking into her, my cock pressed against her and she whimpered into my mouth. I couldn't decide whether she was following her instincts or she had done this before. I wrapped one of her legs around me and she repeated the movement with her other leg.

Her small skirt bunched up around her waist, and the heels of her fuck me shoes dug into my ass.

I pushed my hand into her hair, tilting her head back to meet my eyes. "Last chance, love."

Her hazel eyes widened, clearly contemplating whether she should cross this line. *Green*. They were green, and I fucking loved them. Her full lips were slightly parted as she watched me through her half-lidded gaze.

She wanted this as much as I did, but clearly, she was smarter. I didn't want to go back, but she at least realized she *should* want to go back.

Our breaths thundered, an erratic drumbeat hummed in my ears. "I want more," she demanded softly.

Her fingernails scraped at my nape then she pulled me closer. Her lips met mine and the moment her soft mouth brushed against mine, I thrust my tongue inside her slightly parted mouth. Her sigh was a fucking melody. Her tongue danced in tune with mine.

She tasted exquisite, better than I had ever imagined.

Sweeping her up into my arms, I carried her to my bedroom, shut the door with my foot, then lowered her down.

"What-?" Her protest was weak, her voice breathy as she pressed her palms against my chest for balance.

"You are going to strip off everything but your panties and get on the bed." Her eyes widened, shock and desire mixed in those green eyes. "Now."

My control and need for her teetered on the edge. She must have seen it on my face because she took a step away from me. For a fraction of a second, I thought she'd run. But she headed for my large bed, reaching for the hem of her shirt. She hesitated for a second, glancing back over her shoulder. Her eyes met mine and her lips curved into a soft smile.

I had found my heaven, and she was it.

She turned her head around and slowly lifted the shirt over her head. I watched her lean muscles shift with each movement, tempting me to lick every inch of her body.

Discarding the shirt and bra on the floor, she turned around to face me.

Jesus fucking Christ. She was beautiful.

Then she shimmied her skirt off, and tiny white panties covered her perfect ass.

"I'm going to rip those panties right off of you and eat that pussy for dessert."

Her body shivered in response and a deep blush colored her cheeks. But she still didn't move.

Good girl.

I shrugged out of my suit jacket and tossed it on the chair. My cufflinks followed, as I put them on the dresser. Her eyes followed my every move, just as I followed every move as she stripped for me. Next, I unbuttoned the shirt and tossed it on top of my jacket and then followed with my pants.

She chewed her bottom lip, her breathing choppy and her eyes blazing with fire. Her nipples turned hard as pebbles, straining for my touch.

Standing toe to toe, her head barely reached my chin. But there was something about this woman that made her seem taller, stronger.

My big palms reached for her panties, my thumb sliding under the waistband, then pulling them down her slim legs. I kneeled down, helping her step out of them. She lifted her left leg, then her right. The glimpse of her glistening pussy and the scent of her arousal fragrancng the air had my cock throbbing for her.

"You're drenched for me." A torturous groan left my lips. "I'm going to keep these," I told her, my eyes lifting to see her lust-filled expression focused on me and her mouth parted. What the hell made me want to keep her panties, I had no fucking idea. But I'd kill anyone right now if they'd try to take them from me.

I slid my palm between her legs and cupped her before dragging a single finger through her folds. Her head fell back and a moan echoed.

I swirled my fingertip around her opening, teasing her. Her moans were the best drug. Each sound she made brought me to a new high, and I knew she'd be my addiction for the rest of my life.

She pushed herself against my hand, my finger filling her. Her eyes fluttered shut, and a deep sigh followed. Fuck, just to hear her sounds, I would do this all night.

I pulled my finger out, and her eyes snapped open. "Not yet, sweetheart. We have all night."

Her lips parted, her eyes hazy on me. I picked her up off the floor, and gently threw her on the bed. I gripped her knees and pulled them over my shoulders. She was completely exposed to me, the most glorious sight I had ever seen.

She was the altar, and I'd been brought to my knees to worship her.

I buried my head between her thighs. My tongue lapped at her drenched pussy and my control was gone. She was the only dessert I would have from now on.

"Please," Autumn gasped, her pussy grinding against my face. I flattened my tongue against her clit and nipped at it, then alternated between long, slow licks and fast, hard ones. I could feel her thighs trembling as I feasted on her like I was possessed. My teeth tugged on her clit, then flicked over the sensitive nub with my tongue.

I feasted on her like I hadn't eaten in years.

"Alessandro." Her moans barely penetrated my mind as her body shuddered underneath me. She pushed herself into my mouth, her greedy pussy wanting more. So I pushed a finger inside her slick pussy, and my name left her lips on a scream as the orgasm ripped through her body.

She trembled underneath me and each shiver was the sweetest submission.

"You taste so fucking good," I growled, lapping up every drop as she shuddered beneath me. Her face flushed from

the orgasm, our gazes held and she watched as I kept licking her, hungry for more of her juices.

As I crawled up her body, she traced my every move through heavy eyelids. Every inch of her was flushed from arousal and the pleasure she just experienced. If I was a painter, I'd fucking paint her just as she was in this very moment. With that raven hair fanned around her, every inch of her naked, and her skin flushed.

I placed my cock to her drenched folds, and in one hard thrust, I slammed into her, filling her to the hilt.

Her painful whimper and her nails digging into my shoulders had me stilling. Our eyes locked. She was tight, her pussy clenching around my cock and realization slammed into me.

She was a virgin.

"How... What... " I was lost for words.

I didn't do virgins. I knew she was inexperienced, but the way my sister spoke, Autumn had boys pining after her their entire high school years. And neither one of them were shy about dating. It made me so certain that Autumn was no longer a virgin.

Fuck, I didn't do virgins. Bile rose in my throat as memories crawled up my spine.

Blackouts. Spinning rooms. Cries.

"Alessio." A soft voice. A soft touch. "Hey, Alessio. It's okay." Soft lips skimmed over my neck. "I'm not hurting. I just didn't expect you to be so big."

Her mouth brushed over the corner of mine and her tongue swept over my bottom lip. "Are you okay?"

Every word was soft. Every touch. It was different. She was different.

I blinked, the fog clearing away and the face I've obsessed over for the past four years came into focus. Her eyes were still green, a worried expression replacing her lustful one.

Her palms roamed my back, soothing. Up and down. Her touch feather soft. My ghosts hid, scared of her.

"You okay?" I rasped, my cock demanding I move and fuck her to oblivion while my mind protested with goddamn memories that I've kept at bay for decades.

"Yes." She shifted her hips slightly, grinding her pelvis against mine and her eyes turned the greenest I'd ever seen them. "Just let me get used to you."

Sweat creased my brow. She wouldn't want me if she knew-

I couldn't go there now. Instead, I focused on the woman underneath me. The one that looked at me like I was a god she could corrupt, but it was me who was corrupting her.

My cock throbbed as she slowly shifted, grinding her hips against me and her pussy throbbing around my cock.

The blood pounded in my ears, the most basic instinct inside me demanded I take her hard and fast. My cock had never known better pleasure than at this moment while gripped by the pussy of Autumn Corbin. I could barely breathe, all my need focused on the woman underneath me.

It took me several moments to gather myself. "Want me to stop?"

God help me if she wanted me to stop. I wasn't sure if I was capable.

"No, I'm fine." *Thank fuck!* Her voice was a soft stroke against all my senses.

I slowly pulled back and slid back into her, as I angled to hit her G-spot. Her inner muscles fluttered and clutched at my cock. It took all my self-control to stop myself from rutting her like a beast. I pulled out and pushed inside her again, her moans encouraging, letting me know pleasure replaced her pain.

"Fuck, you're taking me so good," I grunted.

I continued fucking her with long, sure strokes. Her inner muscles clutched at my cock, as she dug her nails into my shoulders, holding on to me. And the whole time, I

watched the bliss on her face. Her green eyes watching me. Her parted mouth tempted me.

I thrust hard and fast, her moans turned into screams, and her pussy clamped down on my cock in a stronghold.

“Fuck!” One more thrust and I was lost. I spilled inside the sweetest pussy I had ever owned.

Our eyes locked and her gaze shimmered like stars in the sky.

“That was perfect,” she murmured softly, brushing her lips over mine.

I hadn’t realized until this very moment. I have been starving for her. For this. For us.

Although deep down, I knew it. It was the reason I went to see her grandparents four years ago. To ensure nobody else got to taste her again.

Autumn was the only woman who could break me.

On more than one account.

It took me three minutes for the realization to sink in.

We didn’t use a condom.

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CHAPTER 9

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ALESSIO

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FOUR YEARS AGO



I dropped a cube of sugar into my espresso, then glanced at my Patek Philippe watch.

Any minute now.

The moment I landed in Philadelphia, I expected my half-brother's cousin - fucking complicated - to show up. Priest DiLustro ran this city. His older brother, Dante, ran Chicago and then there was the biggest asshole of them all, Basilio DiLustro who ran New York.

All three of them were fucking pricks if you asked me. Of course, they had a much longer life ahead of them than Cassio and my gang. It didn't help that most of us had asshole fathers so we felt well beyond our age.

But that was neither here nor there.

What mattered the most was that I found my future wife. Autumn Corbin in her plain cotton bra and thong, and her beautiful soft lips berating me and kicking me out of her bedroom, were a dream come true.

I knew Branka made friends with the granddaughter of the man who ran the Corsican mafia. I hadn't been interested in my sister's best friend until the moment I laid eyes on her. The moment I had, all bets were off.

She was the one I wanted. So I started plotting. I was aware of the agreement between Autumn's parents and grandparents. Autumn was to rule the Corsican mafia or

marry someone who would do it on her behalf. So after her eighteenth birthday, her grandparents had the right to pull her into the underworld. That birthday happened three days ago.

I set my plan into motion. And the head of Blanchet was more than happy to hear my proposal. It helped that they had violated one Russo agreement in the past. Autumn's mother was supposed to be my father's wife. How fucking ironic that I'd be the one to collect that debt now?

Karma was indeed a bitch.

I took a sip of my espresso, the image of Autumn still playing through my mind. Branka mentioned her best friend many times over the course of the last four years. I never paid much attention, although I regretted it now.

Boyfriends. Parties. She was popular. Loved to sing.

I needed more information.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Priest's voice interrupted my enjoyment of superb coffee. Like I said, a goddamn prick.

I returned the tiny cup to its white saucer. The whole fucking thing looked ridiculous in my hands. Fragile. Breakable.

Would Autumn be too fragile for me? I didn't think so. There was a quiet strength in those hazel eyes.

"Hello to you too," I greeted him.

I purposely came to Priest's hotel. A bit to fuck with him and to let him know I had no intention of coming after his city. I had plenty of shit to run, thank you very much.

Meeting his gaze, so blue and unlike the rest of the DiLustros, I watched him quietly. Unlike his cousins, Priest had light hair and eyes that resembled nobody in their family. I wondered if the poor kid knew what that meant. Although, nobody talked about it; it was fucking obvious.

"Cut the shit, Russo," Priest spat, his gaze narrowed on me. "You, Cassio, and your whole gang of old men better not get any ideas in this city."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Well, now that you suggested it- "

Leaving the meaning to linger, I let my lips curve up. It was too much fun to fuck with the younger generation. Of course, Cassio, the gang, and I were once them. Once upon a time. Yeah, I was still waiting for my fairy tale ending.

My eyes traveled around the swanky restaurant. I had to admit, the kid did well. For as young as he was, he established his presence in Philly and ran his underworld activities smoothly, covering it up with his legal businesses. Smart kid.

"Don't get your feathers ruffled," I finally told him. "This is a courtesy visit. I'm visiting the Corsicans."

Priest shoved his hands into his suit pockets, but it didn't escape me that he fisted his hands. Probably ready to punch someone, even wearing that three-piece-suit.

"What the fuck for?" he barked.

Kid had to work on his poker face. He was younger than his cousin and brother by several years, but still. Poker faces were a must in our business. Though I could sense underneath all that, Priest had anger issues. I could spot them a mile away - because I used to have them when I was younger. Fuck, I still had them.

For what my father had done to me.

"A marriage contract," I told him. "And nothing to do with you. Like I said, this is a courtesy visit."

Because I intend to possess the raven-haired beauty with skin the color of thick cream and a tempting mouth that would part as she deliberately opened her legs to expose her sex to me.

Her unwavering stare would watch me as my tongue explored her pussy.

Even if I had to wait four years to have her. There was no way I'd let anyone else see that ass. That image of her bent over, her ass in a thong in my full view seared into my memory.

She was the one for me. Beautiful. Smart. Mine.

Two hours later, I sat in the fancy, very blue parlor that Blanchet used as his office. The fucker should really consider killing his decorator.

"You met our granddaughter?" Marcel Blanchet demanded to know.

Neither he nor his wife had any information on their daughter and granddaughter. Autumn's father knew how to hide their trail, and I had no intention of revealing it. But their last clusterfuck reunion left them with a reluctant agreement.

I nodded.

"Is she righteous like that bastard father of hers or more like her mother?" There was no missing the bitterness behind his question. They hated Corbin for taking their daughter away from them. She was one of their most efficient assassins.

Choosing not to answer their question, I went straight to negotiating.

"For the marriage contract, I'll allow you to pass your arms and drug distributions through Canada. No flesh trading." He opened his mouth to protest but I shut him down. "That part is non-negotiable. The entire East Coast is being cleaned up, and I won't risk having anything like that pass through my territory."

"Fine," he grumbled. "No commission on shipments or profits, right?"

"Right," I agreed. Greedy fucking bastard.

"What else?" he demanded to know.

"Once signed, neither one of them are your concern any longer, and I'll allow your distribution through Canada effective immediately. You will consider the agreement between your daughter and you fulfilled, and Autumn will be bound to me."

"You intend to marry Autumn right away?" he questioned.

"I'll marry her when we are both ready, but in your book, she's married," I warned. "And no longer your concern."

He scoffed. "Do her parents know?"

I stared him down and remained silent until he started to squirm. The old man was well into his eighties and needed to retire. But he refused to pass on the torch to anyone but his daughter or granddaughter. Unfortunately for him, one didn't want it and the other didn't even know he existed.

With this marriage, it would allow me to take control of their businesses upon his passing. He had willing nephews that were quite capable to take over. I might push it off onto them. I didn't want this territory or conflict with the DiLustros.

"Autumn's mother promised she'd allow you to marry her to your most advantageous ally," I told him coldly. "But if you have no say in Autumn's marriage, I'll go and negotiate with Autumn's parents."

That had him straightening in his seat. He hated that he had no power over their daughter. I suspected it made him proud and infuriated at the same time. Compared to my own parents, the Blanchet family was fairly decent.

"Let's sign the contract."

It was that goddamn easy to get a wife these days.

CHAPTER 10

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AUTUMN



I woke up, enveloped in the scent that was quickly becoming a familiarity and the soft moon glow. It was late. Or early, I wasn't certain.

My body ached. The sweet exhaustion kind of ache that I wouldn't mind more of. After he'd spilled inside me, I was sore all over and unable to move. Alessio disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a rag, then gently cleaned me up as I watched him.

And something deep in my chest warmed. Yeah, stupid but what-the-fuck-ever. I loved it.

Alessio was amazing, and I was so fucking glad I waited to do it until now.

I ran a hand across the side of the bed where Alessio slept, but I found the sheets cold. Sitting up, I brought the sheet up to cover my naked body and blinked my eyes. The room was dark but I could smell something. I could sense someone.

"It's me."

My eyes whipped in the direction of the voice, and it was only then that I could distinguish a shape sitting on a chair in the far right corner with the flicker of the red brim of the lit cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked," I murmured.

"I quit."

Something wasn't right, but I couldn't quite figure out what. Maybe he didn't enjoy sex with me as much as I enjoyed it with him. Maybe I overstayed. I pushed my hand through my long, tangled messy hair.

I wasn't experienced like him but my sixth sense told me he enjoyed it. I felt his muscles shudder, his grunts still vibrated in my core, and his mouth devoured me like I was his last meal on Earth. Yeah, I was certain he enjoyed it.

Which left only one conclusion. I must have overstayed my welcome. I shifted off the bed, my feet hitting the hardwood soundlessly.

"I'll get dressed and go," I murmured, rising up.

"Don't you fucking dare."

I stilled, hesitation slithering through my veins. My eyes focused on the dark silhouette. The lit cigarette cast a shadow across Alessio's face. My breath hitched the more he came into focus. He wore ripped jeans, his upper torso completely bare and the sight was beautiful.

It made me want to snap a photo and memorize it forever. Just as he was now. The mixture of darkness and bad boy, but also something deeper. Something vulnerable.

Earlier, or was that yesterday, when he stripped, I noted the ink that marked his upper chest and arms, but I was so focused on him that I didn't get to study the tattoos. It was still hard to distinguish them in the dark, but it'd be impossible to miss how fucking gorgeous he was. Every inch of him.

"Come here." An order and my legs already moved towards him, the sheet dragging behind me. "And lose the sheet."

My grip on the sheet loosened and it dropped soundlessly, pooling around my feet. Something heavy flickered in his gaze, pulling me with invisible strings towards him.

One step. Two steps. I closed the distance between us on the third step and stepped between his spread thighs, his

unique woodsy and spice scent mixing with the cigarettes.

He hadn't moved, but his eyes turned into hot liquid, darker than I've ever seen them.

His one hand came to the inside of my thigh, while his other still held the cigarette. In lazy strokes, his rough palm moved higher and higher, until it cupped my sex and a hitched breath escaped me.

"Are you on birth control?"

I nodded. I'd have to switch to something other than the pill before I left for Kuala Lumpur. Mirena or Depo shot. Anything as long as it eliminated the need of daily intake while I was on the road. But Alessio didn't have to know that.

"Can you lose the cigarette?" I breathed as my hands came to rest on his shoulders. The heat of him burned my fingertips in the best way possible.

"So demanding," he rasped, putting it out in an ashtray on the little side table.

I scoffed softly, my thighs parting wider so I could feel more of him at my core. His hands inched closer and closer to where I wanted him while my fingers circled his shoulders, then down his forearms. His skin was rougher there, like he had scars under that ink.

"You already issued three demands to my one."

My hand paused over one and I sensed him stiffening. The question lingered on my lips, but I didn't want to ruin this moment. This night. So I continued exploring his body, noting more of the similar scars. All under the ink.

"You're beautiful," I whispered. He was, scars or no. Ink or no. Every inch of him was hard, warm and just beautiful.

His knuckles brushed against my pussy and my head fell back while a moan slipped through my lips.

"Are you sore?"

I wanted to lie to him. I wanted more of him inside me. But I knew he'd be able to tell I was lying.

"Just a little bit."

Without a warning, he slid one finger inside me and I whimpered. "You're more than just a little sore."

My pussy clenched around his finger, hungry for that sensation only he could give me.

He went to pull his finger out and my hand wrapped around his wrist.

"Please, Alessandro, I want more." Our gazes locked, his finger at my entrance and my pussy throbbing with the need to have more of him. "Pleasure outweighs the pain."

I lifted my leg and rested my knee on his thigh, grinding myself against his hand. His finger slid deeper inside me and a moan slipped between my lips. His other hand wrapped around my neck and pulled me to him, keeping our faces inches apart. The cigarette burned on the ashtray next to him.

Kind of like the two of us. Would we burn out in the end?

Because to feel something so intense when someone touches you couldn't last. Right?

"From the moment I saw you amidst that ridiculous girly bedroom, your ass perked up in the air, I have fantasized about *this*." His admission surprised me and made my chest glow with satisfaction. He didn't forget me. "You writhing under me, like a goddess, begging me to fuck you."

This man boiled all my thoughts into single words. *Want. Need. Pleasure.*

"Are you going to kiss me, Alessandro?" I murmured, my lips brushing against his and all the while his finger remained in my pussy. He thrust it deep inside me and my moan vibrated against his mouth.

"Alessio," he gritted. "Nobody calls me Alessandro."

"Alessandro," I retorted back, taking his bottom lip between my teeth. "I like being the only one to call you by that name."

It made it special. It made it ours.

I gently nipped his lip, then swept my tongue over it to ease the sting. And the entire time, my body rocked against

his hand. Another finger joined in, stretching me. "Oh, fuck."

"That's right," he hissed, then took my mouth for a rough kiss as his fingers thrust in and out of my clenching pussy. "You're mine now."

I couldn't think when he made me feel like this. Like he'd fracture me, shatter me to pieces, only to put me together again.

Alessio's kiss was dominant and intense, but then I expected nothing less. My lips molded into his, all his hardness stealing my breath and sanity. He angled my head back and ravished me with the need I felt deep inside me, and all I could do was feel. Give in to him.

His tongue thrust in and out of my mouth, in sync with his fingers and the intense pleasure lit up in the pit of my stomach. My breasts thrust in his face, and he wrapped his lips around a nipple. His slight stubble created a friction against my soft skin as he sucked and nipped and bit, and all the while his fingers thrust in and out of me.

My fingers curled into his shoulders, desperate for some balance and control but he held all the control. I craved him so much that I feared I'd burn out if I couldn't have him.

My core was slick with juices and throbbing, my orgasm within reach. He circled my clit, his appreciative groan sending vibrations deep to the pit of my stomach.

"You're so fucking wet." The tone of his voice was appreciative, the look in his eyes hungry.

"Please, Alessandro," I breathed. "I-I want you inside me."

The sound of the zipper sent a shiver through me. A seductive echo promising pleasure. I barely had time to process what he was doing, when he took hold of my hips and slammed inside me, both of my legs straddling him.

I screamed and exploded over his hard cock buried deep inside me while black dots swam in front of my vision. My

body shuddered and he kept me close to him, his huge shaft filling me, my chest pressed against his.

Heart-to-heart.

"Just remember, you asked for it." His raspy, slightly unhinged voice sent a thrill down my spine. And then he lost any semblance of control. His fingers dug into my soft hips and he pounded into me with an urgency.

My thighs slammed against his, pleasure coiled deep in the pit of my stomach with each hard thrust. His groans and my moans mixed, utterly addictive and leaving both of us to chase the same pleasure.

"Ahhh. A-Alessandro..." My voice turned high-pitched, mixing with moans as the second orgasm brewed inside me.

"Mine." *Slap.* The sting against my bare ass caught me unaware and surprisingly, I could feel the burn of his slap spread to my core and my pussy pulsed with the need for more.

"More," I demanded. *Slap. Slap. Slap.*

My stomach tensed and my fingers curled, nails sinking into his flesh. I was marking him just as he was marking me. I was so close. The sensation built and built, magnifying with each thrust.

"Don't hold back, love." He thrust harder, hitting my G-spot. Alessio wasn't just fucking me, he was owning me. "I know you want to scream my name."

He dominated every single cell within me. The way he gripped my waist, I had a feeling I'd feel him for months.

My orgasm detonated and took me under so strongly that I almost forgot to breathe. His hips jerked forward, his cock thrusting into me through my orgasm and my eyes rolled to the back of my head.

Stars exploded behind my eyelids as I panted and fought for breath. I thought I'd die and it wouldn't be a bad way to go. I pressed my head in the crook of his neck, inhaling his scent deep into my lungs.

With the last thrust, Alessio followed me over the cliff, spilling inside me.

“Fuck,” he grunted with his face buried in my hair.

His hot cum filled me, and I could feel it trickle down my inner thighs.

We remained like this, his arms cocooning me protectively, both of us breathing harshly.

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CHAPTER II

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ALESSIO



This intense reaction towards Autumn wasn't normal.

I woke up with her face pressed against my chest. Most of her face was covered by thick, dark strands and I knew I was fucked.

My cock talked my heart into playing. Now, I was screwed. I felt her lips on mine, her fingers on my scars, and I knew it was something I couldn't live without. It was that fucking easy to fall for her.

I wrapped my fingers around those silky strands to see her sleeping face.

Serene. Happy. Beautiful.

So different from me. Filthy. Twisted. Ugly.

And still, I couldn't resist her. I lost all control and spilled my seed inside her. I didn't fucking regret it. My only regret was that she was on birth control. I wanted to tie her to me.

I had to bind her to me before she found out everything. All the twisted history that tainted me. If she learned what I had done, she'd despise me. She wanted to save the world; I fucking ruined it.

It was exactly the reason I put a marriage contract in place with her grandparents. It was my backup plan in case she rejected me. Yes, it turned out I was a selfish prick like

my bastard father. But the thought of losing this was unfucking-bearable.

If she knew what I had done, she would reject me.

Something in my chest twisted at the thought of losing Autumn. Or maybe it was at the thought of forcing her to do something and seeing pain in her eyes.

I never wanted to be the reason to see her hazel greens turn brown.

For the past four years, I kept all college boys and men in California away from Autumn. As my friends liked to point out, it was a tad bit overboard. So fucking what. They'd done the same if not worse for their women. Cassio was plotting how to get his woman. Luciano forced his woman to marry him in his plot to avenge his mother and sister. The Nikolaev men were full blown stalking their women and those women didn't even know it. Well, except for Sasha. Whatever woman that psychopath put on his radar, I felt sorry for her.

We cheat, steal, and kill for what we want.

And then there was the fact that I fucking hated when people looked at what's mine, never mind dared to touch it.

It was the reason I was now back at Fleur's bar, right after I dropped Autumn home.

In the early morning hours, before the sun was even up, we both dressed in silence, and true to my word, I kept her panties. She protested a bit, but then caved in after I lowered myself down onto my knees and ate her pussy, her fingers gripping my hair like she was scared I'd stop.

She had no fucking idea it took only one time for me to become addicted to her.

I stared at the ancient building of Fleur's bar. On the outside, it looked old as dirt. On the inside, all the latest upgrades had been made.

Fleur and I had an agreement. I financed fifty percent of her business, but I got to use her bunker in the basement.

It was one of the kind, used in 1642 by merchants to smuggle their goods.

Upgraded use, torture chamber. It made it a convenient way to dump a body too.

Fleur understood the need for it. She had seen firsthand the various shades of gray required to survive in this world. She was a victim once. The legal system couldn't save her. It required a gray motherfucker like me to finally do that.

But my sins still remained. There'd be no washing those away.

True to my word, the fucker who dared touch my woman lost his fingers. He was lucky I didn't finish him off. But that was about to change. This world would be a better place without him.

The door closed behind me with a quiet click.

In the early hours of the morning, before the sun even came up, the soft click sounded like a gunshot. The fucker jumped in his seat even with the chains keeping him hostage and his palms pressed on his knees.

His eyes shot my way, fear clear on his face. He'd been here since last night.

My cold gaze swept over him. Dirty and now bloody muscle shirt, no fucking muscles. Balding head.

His left hand was missing fingers and they laid on the ground, smeared with blood and dirt. There was no saving them. His blanched face held fear. Not enough fear.

Last night I had only gotten started. I decided to have a background check ran on the fucker before I let him go, and it turned out, this fucker liked to force himself on little girls. So letting him go was no longer an option.

Acid burned in my blood at the thought of his filthy hands on Autumn, even for a fraction of a moment.

"Do you know why you're here?" I asked, my tone cold and my lip curled with disdain.

I pulled the blade out of my pocket and the fucker's eyes bulged with terror. He started to wheeze, gasping for air.

"Please, please, no more," he begged.

I ignored him, gripping the handle of the blade as I leaned forward.

"You touched what's mine," I said coldly, then drove the blade through his hand and straight to his upper thigh. Flesh and bone yielded as an inhuman howl at the highest pitch ripped from his throat and vibrated against the cement walls of the room.

The blood pooled around him and I found sadistic pleasure in making him suffer. I pushed the knife deeper into his hand, the blade digging further into his thigh.

The smell of urine filled the air as he stared at me, his eyes glassy with pain.

My teeth clenched. Thank fuck this room was all concrete. I couldn't fucking stand piss stains on hardwood or tile.

"Please, enough," he yelped, tears wetting his face.

"Fucking coward," I gritted.

Then because I knew this guy would fucking cry and probably shit himself next, I decided to end it. I pulled out my gun and the gunshots ripped through the air.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I watched as the light extinguished from his eyes, then his body slumped over the chains, blood dripping from his skull.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Some of it splashed on my boots. Thank fuck I opted for jeans and a plain black t-shirt. I'd be pissed if blood got on my suit or loafers.

Tucking the gun in the back of my jeans, I walked over to the little sink and washed my hands.

There was not enough soap produced to wash all of my sins away.

Leaving the body for one of my men to clean up, I exited into the hall and ran into Byron, lounging against the wall.

"Stalking me?" I mused in a sarcastic tone.

I didn't show my surprise. Truthfully, nothing surprised me about the persistent fucker anymore. Although reluctantly I had to admit that my younger half-brother was as stubborn as I was.

"You're not hard to find," Byron retorted dryly. "You finished him off?" he asked. The whole cellar was soundproof so there was no risk of him hearing anything that happened while inside.

"What do you want, Byron?" I answered with my own question instead. "Looking for something to hold over my head so we can play one big happy family?"

His jaw tightened.

"Not one big happy family," he said dryly. "But I would like you on my side."

"Why? So you can get extra funds for your father's campaign?"

"He's your father too," he remarked dryly.

He barely finished the sentence and I got into his face.

"Not. My. Father." I gritted, my jaw ticking. A fucking father didn't leave his kid to be raised by a sadistic monster. A father didn't let his son live in hell. He knew my mother was pregnant but he didn't want his precious political career ruined by an illegitimate son so he swept me under the rug.

A part of me wanted to pounce, destroy my father and his shiny little life. But I knew it wasn't time yet. I'd have to hold myself back with a fine thread of self-control and keep my cold logic. I'd destroy him when the presidency was within his grasp. He'd have it so fucking close, right at the tip of his fingertips, just to be yanked away. By me.

"Get lost, Byron," I told him as I walked away from him. "Next time I see you, I'll take it as you're poaching my territory and you'll have a war."

"Bring it on, Brother."

Like I said, a stubborn motherfucker.

I SAT IN MY OFFICE, in the building I owned, away from the *father* who gave me my last name. It was pretty much all he fucking gave me.

It was only ten in the morning. It has been six hours and thirty eight minutes since I'd dropped Autumn off and I already fucking missed her. So goddamn much that I had to ponder whether I was feverish.

I pulled out my phone and checked Autumn's Instagram. She often posted pictures and updates on it. Today was no exception. I had to be ancient or she had to be way too young, but that girl lived on social platforms. It served me well over the last four years.

I stared at the photo.

Tousled red sheets and raven black mane sprawled on the pillow like a fan. You couldn't see her face, but I knew exactly what it meant.

She was no longer a virgin.

The usual acid didn't come. Instead, a strange sensation sparked in my chest. She gave me a big piece of her, but she also took something from me. I just couldn't quite figure out what.

I skimmed through her other photos, although I'd seen them before. I'd been stalking her Instagram for the past four years. From a burner phone and anonymous account. Yeah, I was too old to stalk a twenty-something woman.

Yet, here I was. Although this didn't compare to the fucked up way the Nikolaev brothers stalked. Especially Sasha when he was in for the kill. So yeah, I was much better.

A knock shattered the silence and I flicked my gaze up to Branka entering without waiting for a response.

"Why do you knock if you are going to enter regardless?" I grumbled.

Much like her friend, she rolled her eyes at me. Do these two realize I've killed men for less?

"Whatever."

I leaned back in my chair and locked my gaze on my little sister who wasn't so little anymore. Nico made an interesting remark yesterday that I hadn't thought about until that moment. Unless I secured her a match with a family that could protect her, Branka could end up being targeted just for sharing the same last name as our bastard father. He had a bad habit of double-crossing powerful men, and they wouldn't blink an eye to end her for his sins.

My enemies wouldn't hesitate to come after her too. I'd have to find a way to protect her before Father made a deal with another sadistic asshole to sell Branka.

Tabling the thought for now, I waited for Branka to say whatever she came here to say. I knew her well enough to know she needed to talk. Otherwise, she'd never step foot in my office.

She reminded me of Mia. Our dead sister. Branka didn't remember her much. She was young when Mia committed suicide. She survived our parents. She fucking went into a war and survived. But it took a group of dickheads to drive her to suicide. It was a bitter fucking pill to swallow.

Ironically, it was Sasha Nikolaev who ended them. He happened to be on a similar rotation and found those fuckers raping her. My only regret was that Sasha killed them before I could.

My expression darkened at the memory of that funeral. My mother didn't cry. Father came to the gravesite as they lowered Mia's casket into the ground. I didn't cry but my eyes burned; my fucking chest hurt like a motherfucker.

Branka was the only one who cried that day. Her hand was pressed against her chest. The second I spotted the faded cigarette burn on her hand, a red mist descended over me. I had no idea how I found myself on top of my father, beating him black and blue right above Mia's casket.

After someone pulled me off of him, I took Branka away from him and our mother, and moved her in with me.

"Should I leave?" Branka's voice pulled me from the past.

"No."

Flicking a nervous look my way, Branka sat down in the empty chair across from me, my desk the only thing separating us.

A deep exhale filled the air. "Are you mad?" she blurted out.

"You're going to have to be a bit more specific," I retorted dryly. I wondered if Autumn told her what had happened between the two of us last night. Maybe I should be asking my sister whether she was mad I'd banged her best friend.

But I wouldn't, because that would imply I'd stop if she was mad, and I had no intention of stopping it.

Branka let out another deep sigh. "That I didn't ask you about going with Autumn on her world photography adventure."

"When did you and Autumn decide that?" I questioned her.

"On our way to Fleur's, Autumn and I got to talking. I told her how much I hated to be in the same city as Father, and she invited me to come along," she answered. "If I can't use my money, she even offered to help with expenses." Branka's fingers wrapped around her wrist. It was her nervous habit. Too many broken wrists in her childhood. "I'll pay for it too."

"We have the money," I told her. "No need for her to pay for it."

Her gray eyes reminded me of rain. I had no fucking idea why but they always stabbed a soft spot in my heart. Maybe because I felt guilty for not protecting her sooner. Or maybe because I saw my pain in hers.

"I should stay for you, but I'm a coward," she murmured, a guilty expression on her face.

"You're not a coward," I growled. "Never say that again. You're a survivor, Branka. My sister and my family. I'll be damned if I ever see you hurt. No matter when, what or how, I'll always be here for you. Okay?"

A happy smile spread on her face, and it was the best damn gift. Seeing my baby sister smiling and happy.

I stood up and adjusted the sleeve of my suit, then came around to be closer to her. Leaning against the table, I studied her. We didn't look very much alike, aside from the eyes. We both inherited those from our mother. I looked more like my biological father and she looked more like her father's side of the family. But in our heart, we were the same.

"Is that something you want to do?" I asked her.

Before I even finished the question, she nodded enthusiastically. "It is."

"Why study social media and marketing if you now want to get involved in photography?" I questioned her softly.

She grinned. "I won't be taking photos for Nat Geo. That will be all Autumn. We're thinking about starting a travel influencer site and blogging."

My lips tugged up. "Interesting."

I knew absolutely nothing about it and it seemed something the younger generation would do but if it made her happy, it made me happy.

Branka grinned. "Right?" The enthusiasm on her face was contagious so I just nodded. As long as she was happy, I didn't care what she did. She would never lack money so she might as well enjoy her life. "So you're okay if I leave with Autumn?"

"I wouldn't exactly say I was okay with it," I told her, smiling. "But I want to see you happy. And don't be surprised at your big brother's frequent visits," I warned.

She jumped out of her seat and threw herself into my arms. Just as she used to do when she was a little girl.

"Thanks, Alessio," she murmured into my chest. "You're so much better than me. I ran away from our father and you continue to fight him head on."

Her father, not mine. But she didn't know that. Nobody but the Ashfords, myself, and the cruel asshole who raised me knew that. My mother, of course, knew but she was six feet under now.

"I could always kill him for you," I half-joked.

She shook her head, her face still pressed against my chest. "No, brother. He'll get his. Eventually."

Not fucking soon enough.

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CHAPTER 12

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AUTUMN



I sat on the floor of my bedroom in my boy shorts and a green t-shirt, surrounded by my notes, photos, and more notes. Another few days and we'd be on our way to Asia. Our first destination - Kuala Lumpur.

Except after last night, I had something, or rather someone, that had me wanting to stay. My whole body was still enveloped in the sweetest exhaustion and even after a shower, I could smell him on my skin.

I wanted to bottle the scent and keep it with me forever.

The door to my room swung open, hitting the wall behind it and I groaned.

"Branka!" I scolded.

My best friend stretched her arm up above her head and leaned against the doorframe while with her other one she held out a cup of iced coffee.

"Here I am," she announced.

"I can see that," I retorted dryly. Okay, so maybe last night's activity had left me a bit tired and cranky. I reached out for the cup of coffee she held in her one hand. Branka hated iced coffee, so it had to be for me. She pushed it into my hand and I took a slurp.

"Nothing beats good coffee," I purred.

"Sex does," she snickered. "If you'd only give it a try."

I shook my head but my cheeks flushed because her brother immediately came to mind. She was absolutely right. Sex beat coffee a hundred times over.

"Have you given it a try?" I snickered, knowing the answer very well.

She shrugged. "I came close, but during our adventures, I will find an exotic man and have mind-blowing sex. You will too."

I smiled but hesitation and a demand to know Alessio's plans for us warred inside me. He didn't say that he wanted to see me again. Granted, I didn't ask, but why couldn't he at least show that he wanted to see me again.

He dropped me off, sexy as all hell in his ripped up jeans and black t-shirt, without even a kiss. He could have at least pecked my cheek.

"My brother agreed," Branka beamed and I blinked in confusion. Her brother told her he should have kissed me goodbye?

I met her eyes so much like her brothers, shining like molten silver. "He did?" I asked surprised.

Gosh, I wanted to have sex with him again. Again and again. I wanted to explore his entire body, kiss every inch of his skin and more than anything, I wanted to study the ink marking his chest and arms. I wanted to kiss his scars hiding underneath it. I wanted to know the story that he hid.

"Yeah, Alessio thinks it will be a good experience for us," she elaborated and I ignored the sinking feeling of disappointment. Alessio was fine with me just going on my way. Last night didn't mean as much to him as it did to me. He probably had women on speed dial. "Oh my gosh, we're really doing this," she beamed.

Pushing Alessio out of my mind and getting back on track to my goal, I focused on our impending trip.

My lips tipped up. "We're really doing this," I repeated.

Branka's eyes traveled over the floor. "What are you doing?"

I shrugged. "Preparing."

"Where are your parents?" she demanded to know. "We should all go out to celebrate. Late lunch."

I returned my attention back to my notes. "Maman is shopping and Father is meeting with an old friend or something."

"Then let's just go," she suggested. "Your favorite. Kebabs."

I groaned. "Why do you tempt me?"

She grinned wide. "Because I'm evil. Bwahaha."

Attempting to let out an evil sound, she totally ruined it with her contagious laughter. I tried so hard to keep a straight face, biting the inside of my cheek. But the look in my eyes must have ruined it because she lunged onto the floor, knocking me backwards. I sat my ice coffee out of the way, barely avoiding disaster on my plush white rug.

"I know you want to laugh," she teased, tickling me. "Show me. Show me."

We giggled on my floor for the next half an hour. Just like we had in our high school years.

FEELING LIGHTER and with Alessio out of my mind, we entered the restaurant in downtown Montréal two hours later. I wore a simple light green dress that stopped a little above my knees. Each time I wore it, I received compliments that it brought out the green in my eyes. Branka borrowed my red dress of the same design, making us appear more like sisters.

We laughed and chatted about all our grand plans, waiting for the hostess to come and seat us.

My hair fell down my back in soft waves and I opted for no make-up. It made me look younger, but I really had nobody to impress. Because the man I gave my virginity to thought it was a good decision for me to move on. But hey, I wasn't bitter. Not at all.

"Long time no see, ladies."

The hostess greeted us and both of us turned our attention to her. "Hello, Jasmine. How are you?"

"Better question is how are you two?" Her eyes studied both of us. "I hear you're leaving in a week for Asia, Branka." My eyebrows shot up at that knowledge. Jasmine must have read my expression because she added, "Alessio."

"Ohhh," both Branka and I let out at the same time while the little green monster slithered through me.

Are those two sleeping together? I wondered. An irrational bite of jealousy slammed into me and tasted like acid, but I had to swallow it down. It wasn't like Alessio and I dated before I threw myself at him.

"Daughter." A cold voice I never cared to hear reached us, and I stiffened at the same time as Branka paled.

The two of us slowly turned in the direction of that voice and found Branka's father and brother sitting at the table with two other men. I gulped as my eyes traveled over them, but they ended on Alessio.

My gaze always came back to him. He had a darkness that was impossible to resist.

"We should have gone somewhere else," Branka muttered under her breath. I couldn't agree more.

"They don't need a table, Jasmine." Branka's father barked, drawing everyone's attention to us. "They'll sit with us."

Refuse, my reason demanded. My parents would be furious to know I sat at the same table as Branka's father. Never mind other mobsters.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered under her breath, desperation lacing her tone.

I let out a heavy sigh. If my parents didn’t know, it wouldn’t hurt them. Besides, I didn’t want to cause a scene so I followed Branka with heavy steps.

My heart rate kicked up with each step I took towards the table. Unfortunately, it was caused by the man who made my body burn last night, not the clear danger lurking at that table. With his black suit and sharp features, Alessio belonged on *GQ*, not in a restaurant, next to his bastard father.

I let out a shuddering breath, attempting to calm down my racing heart. Alessio never indicated he wanted a relationship. Not that we did much talking last night.

Don’t think of that, my mind murmured. *Don’t think about that*.

Otherwise, I’d melt into a puddle. Instead, I met Alessio’s furrowed brows as he stood up, his eyes locked on me. Something in his gaze made my skin sizzle and my fingers tremble. You’d think after last night, the reaction would ease but it hadn’t. Instead, I reacted even more intensely.

He was so tall that I had to crane my neck the closer I got to him.

Forcing my gaze away from him, my eyes traveled slowly over the men and I swallowed a lump in my throat. They screamed of danger. So did Alessio but he didn’t stir fear within me. Only lust.

His father on the other hand made my skin crawl. And these other two men were scary. They had the most unusual blonde hair I had ever seen. Their attention was on Branka and me, but it was their size that was terrifying. Even sitting down, they seemed to somehow tower and swallow all the oxygen in the room. I raised my eyes to their faces and blinked. Then blinked again to ensure I was seeing their eye color right. They were the palest blue.

Wow. Just freaking, wow!

They both stood up and I almost wished they hadn't, because they towered like dark, threatening clouds. Branka and I instantly took a small step back, our instincts kicking us into self-defense mode.

Branka's eyes flicked my way as if she wondered if I knew them. As if! I gave her a barely noticeable shrug and both our eyes returned to the two men. Despite their huge size, I'd be totally blind not to notice they were both good looking. Extremely so.

"Ladies, meet Vasili and Sasha Nikolaev," Alessio introduced us and my eyes immediately returned back to him. Like he was my magnet and just like that, my heart skipped a beat. Just one night of sex and I was a goner for this man. Ugh. "Gentlemen, my sister, Branka Russo and her best friend Autumn Corbin."

There were only two available seats. One seated next to Sasha Nikolaev and the other next to Alessio. Was it bad that I wanted to leave the seat next to Sasha Nikolaev to Branka? She must have had the same idea because her eyes flickered to the chair next to her brother and both of us eyed it longingly.

It was self-preservation mode for both of us.

"Nice to meet you," Sasha drawled, his pale blue eyes darting between Branka and me, then locking on Branka. Relief washed over me. A smart woman didn't want that guy's attention.

Alessio Russo is so much better, my brain mocked my heart.

"I didn't realize the ladies would be joining us," Sasha drawled.

"Is our discussion appropriate for the ladies?" Vasili asked, his brows furrowed. "I wouldn't want my sister to be troubled with such topics."

Well, that was a first.

"We can go." Branka's voice was barely audible, both of us stiff and shifting on our feet. We both wanted to bolt and never look back.

"You'll both stay," her father demanded.

A gulp sounded. It could have been mine.

Sasha pulled out a chair next to him, his pale eyes locked on Branka. Thank God! Although she didn't move, he kept waiting for her to sit down while her gaze kept flicking to the empty chair next to her brother.

"Sit down, Branka," her father barked. "You too, Autumn."

Both of us startled immediately and our legs moved of their own will.

Alessio held the other chair and both of us sank into the pulled out chairs. Anxiety buzzed under my skin. I flicked a side-glance at Alessio almost as if he'd save me which in itself was ludicrous. Just because we had sex last night, it didn't mean he'd save me.

"Isn't this nice?" Branka's father drawled, leering at me. A shudder rolled down my spine, and it took all I had not to seek out Alessio's gaze for help. "It's about time that Autumn Corbin had a sit down with me, isn't it?"

My spine stiffened and foreboding slithered through my veins. My parents always emphasized keeping away from the Russo men. It didn't take a genius to figure out why. All you had to do was look at Branka's mother.

"Or should I call you Autumn Blanchet?" I flicked a confused look to Alessio, then to Branka who rolled her eyes then snickered. She was scared of her father but when her brother was around, her bravery showed through. "Show some respect, Branka," he roared and we both jumped in our seats. "Or we'll see who's rolling their eyes last!"

Another gulp sounded. No idea if it was mine or Branka's, or maybe both of us, but I had a bad feeling about this. I should have just kidnapped Branka and ran. To

hell with her father. Yet, my body was so stiff it refused to move.

The tension was palpable; I could almost taste it. Silence was thick, but it seemed to only affect Branka and me. Sasha produced bubblegum out of nowhere and the crinkle of the wrapper filled the air. I gave him an incredulous look, but he ignored me. His brother, Vasili, seemed unconcerned with his brother or Branka's father. Alessio didn't seem worried at all either. Or maybe both were hiding it extremely well.

Sasha threw gum into his mouth with a grin that promised something vicious, although I couldn't quite distinguish who it was aimed at. He popped the gum as he crushed the wrapper in his hand.

The hand that I was certain killed many people. I stared at the symbols inking his fingers that I couldn't read. My eyes returned to Alessio who stared at Sasha with displeasure scrawled all over his face. Then his eyes met mine and instantly the frown between his eyes eased and I drowned in his gray gaze.

"Been playing with fire, huh?" Branka's father drawled and both of our eyes snapped to him. He was staring at Alessio and me. His *tsk* followed, an unpleasant grin marring his ugly face. He looked like a snake that was about to swallow a mouse. Vicious and about to pounce.

A waitress came around, interrupting the tense and uncomfortable silence. Neither Branka nor I seemed capable of opening our mouths so Alessio placed the order on our behalf. And the whole while, the old Russo's eyes never left me.

"How is your mother, Autumn?" Mr. Russo asked, a cruel gleam lurking in his eyes. I didn't like it. I felt vulnerable under his dark, menacing gaze.

My eyes flickered around the table, then returned to the old man. Unlike his son who was tall and handsome, Mr.

Russo was short, bald and sported a gut that would put a pregnant woman to shame.

"Fine," I answered through my clenched teeth.

He rubbed his belly, a smug look on his face. "And your maternal grandparents?"

My brows furrowed and confusion entered my expression. "They're dead."

Truthfully, I didn't even know their names. My mother never spoke of her parents. She just said they were out of the picture. We left it at that. I had my paternal grandparents who were a big part of our lives until they both passed away.

He chuckled. "Not possible. Did they die within the last month?" he questioned and I blinked.

My tongue swept nervously over my bottom lip and I met Branka's gaze. She seemed just as clueless as I was.

My eyes darted to Alessio, but his face was unreadable. A mask of indifference. Except for the slightest muscle that tightened in his jaw and his expression that darkened. Vasili and Sasha Nikolaev wore a similar expression. Although I was unsure whether it was aimed at me or Branka's father.

It felt like being thrown to the wolves with no way of getting away.

Alessio's father chuckled, creepy and dark. Knowledgeable. Both my hands laid in my lap, under the table and I hadn't realized my nails were digging into my palm until a big, warm hand covered mine.

I stilled for a moment, but I didn't move. A comforting squeeze and it was an infusion of strength I needed.

"As far as I know, they've been dead for a long time," I said, my voice deceptively calm.

Alessio's father brought his fist to the table. Branka and I startled in our seats. Silverware rattled.

"Now that's a lie," he spat, venom coloring his voice. "Your grandparents are very much alive. They run the

Corsican mafia. And your mother was their most efficient assassin."

He must be mad. Crazy. Delusional.

"You're wrong," I insisted with an incredulous snicker. "My mother is a singer. An artist."

He laughed. Hard and loud. Looks flickered our way but I kept my eyes on the biggest threat. The old Russo.

"Singer," he snickered. "Yeah, she always liked to sing. I remember her skimming around in her little Catholic skirt and playing that piano. Men pant for that good girl look."

Fury simmered through my veins. "I don't give a shit what men pant for," I hissed, staring him down. "You have my mother mistaken for someone else. She is an artist with no connection to this Corsican mafia."

"You're the spitting image of her," he continued, like I hadn't spoken. "There was only one Alessandra Blanchet. That raven hair runs in the family. Your eyes are all wrong though. They have to be your father's."

The last word sounded like a curse on his tongue.

"For the last time, you have my mother mistaken for someone else," I gritted. "My father would never connect himself with someone like *you*."

This time, he threw his head back and laughed. A snickering, menacing, got-you kind of laugh.

My father was an ex-special agent. It would have ruined his career. Except, my father never really explained how or why he got out of that career. I always assumed it was because he decided to become an advisor and retire early so he could see me grow up.

"But your father gave up that career," he cackled like a fucking witch. "Or he was booted," he sneered, his lips curled disgustingly.

My fingers curled around the sleeve of Alessio's jacket, fisting it like he was my life raft. At this moment, he was my lifeline.

“He wasn’t fired,” Alessio said, his voice pure ice. “He resigned and raised his daughter.”

“How would you know that?” Branka questioned, her eyes wide, darting between her father, Alessio, and I.

Her father laughed smugly and I wanted to claw his face. No wonder Branka couldn’t stand him. “What kind of father would I be if I didn’t know who my daughter hung out with?”

I hadn’t met Branka’s father before. The first time I saw him was at the funeral, but now, I regretted attending it. I didn’t like Branka’s father before and I certainly didn’t like him now. In fact, I detested him.

“Autumn’s connections are of no relevance,” Alessio stated matter-of-factly, his voice cold. Why did it sound like Alessio knew something I didn’t?

“No relevance?” Mr. Russo spat, his saliva spluttering all over the table. My nose scrunched and my appetite was suddenly gone. “She could be spying for them.”

Alessio laughed, clearly displaying he didn’t believe that.

“It seems to me that Miss Corbin’s parents wanted to spare her the harsh reality of this kind of life,” Vasili chimed in, his voice cold. “Now can we conclude our agreement or are we going to argue further?”

I had no idea who Vasili Nikolaev was but suddenly, I liked him very much.

For the next thirty minutes, whatever deal the Nikolaev were working on was concluded. All the men spoke in code while Branka and I sat in silence, pretending to eat but we really just pushed it around on our plates.

And all the while I pondered on the revelation of my maternal grandparents.

CHAPTER 13

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ALESSIO



Secrets never stay buried long.

The fact that Autumn didn't know the identity of her maternal grandparents this long was a miracle. I'd known it since the first playdate those two had. I always checked into all of Branka's friends.

But this lousy excuse of a father didn't bother looking into Autumn until he saw her at my mother's funeral. He didn't fucking care about Branka at all. She was a daughter, a disposable commodity that he held against my mother. Both my deceased sister and Branka were expendable to him.

In Father's eyes, it was my mother's fault she couldn't produce him an heir.

Father didn't know I kept tabs on all his activities. His resources were nothing compared to mine. Nico Morrelli was my main man for any information I needed and he came through every time.

Nobody knew that Autumn was in line to inherit the Corsican mafia upon her grandfather's passing.

I also knew that my father tried to arrange a contract to wed Autumn's mother. Unsuccessfully.

Smart woman. Lucky woman.

Bottom line, I knew this day would come. The moment my father laid eyes on Autumn, he'd know who she was due

to her resemblance to her mother. The woman who denied him. The fucker hated that.

And now he was eyeing her daughter. Too late fucker. She was mine and the contract I had put in place with Autumn's grandfather four years ago ensured that. If Father dared to even touch her, the streets of this city would be colored red because I'd fight him and all his fucking men until I finished him. Once and for all.

I shot a quick text message to my right hand man to set one of my father's warehouses on fire. I was tired of dealing with the fucker. It took Ricardo only ten minutes to make it happen. It was the reason he was irreplaceable.

My father's phone beeped but he remained leering at my woman. Then it beeped again and he glanced at it. That got him running.

My lips tugged up at seeing him wobble out of here, his men surrounding him the moment he stepped outside. He was so fucking paranoid about a sniper shooting him as he walked to his car.

"Fucking finally," Sasha Nikolaev announced. Neither one of the Nikolaev men wanted to deal with the old bastard anyhow. "You should get that asshole eliminated. I can help with it."

"I agree," Branka mumbled under her breath. "Let the Russian take the blame." All our heads snapped her way and her eyes widened. "Did I say that out loud?"

I nodded. Maybe Branka was a bit more ruthless than I thought. She'd need it to survive in this world.

"Just give me a date and time," Sasha grinned, watching her calculatively. I didn't fucking like it. "And it's done."

"I can handle my father," I told him.

Autumn shifted uncomfortably, her eyes darting between all of us, probably wondering if we were joking or not.

"Can Autumn and I go to the bar?" My little sister didn't waste any time.

I nodded and the two of them left us without a backwards glance, leaving me to finalize the deal with Nikolaev men.

"I can have him gone today," Sasha offered one last time. The fucker was persistent if nothing else. "Like your gorgeous little sister pointed out, the Russians will be to blame," Sasha deadpanned, but something unhinged lurked in those eyes. All the Nikolaev siblings had the same color eyes. I didn't like it that one of those pale blue eyes was focused on my sister sitting at the bar, only fifteen feet away from us.

"All you have to do is give me your little sister," Sasha added with a wide grin, and suddenly I was in the mood to beat it off his face.

"Sasha," Vasili warned.

"Let me make one thing clear," I added, my voice deadly calm. "My little sister is not on the table. Never will be. She. IS. OFF LIMITS. And if I have to kill you to make that point, I will."

Much later, I'd realize those words made my sister a forbidden fruit to Sasha Nikolaev.

IT TOOK us another twenty minutes to finalize the details of the next distribution. Guns and drugs were my businesses of choice. I didn't touch human trafficking, but unfortunately the same couldn't be said for my father.

The two brothers departed, leaving me alone with Branka and Autumn. For a moment, I watched them whisper to each other as Autumn's finger swept over her phone.

"If we can get pictures like this in front of people," Autumn said in her soft voice, "it'd bring awareness. Make people help."

She was strategizing on how to save the world and I just made a deal that would further corrupt it. The differences between us were so stark. Would she stay with me if she knew exactly what kind of shit I dealt in? Even better question was would I give it up for her?

Branka reached over and swept to another screen.

"Next time I send you a message, Branka," I told my sister calmly, "read it."

If she had, Autumn and Branka wouldn't have crossed paths with the old man. Both of them shifted towards me, their eyes darting behind me. As if they wanted to ensure Father was gone.

My sister didn't need any additional scolding. Her complexion was just as pale as Autumn's and they only recovered after Father's departure. The Nikolaev brothers could be intimidating to outsiders, and so far, I'd kept Branka out of the underworld. Just as Autumn's parents had kept her out of it too.

"Let's go back to the table so you two can eat," I told them. I watched Autumn's slim body slide off the barstool, then bent down to grab her purse she had carelessly discarded on the floor.

Fuck, she had a gorgeous ass. My dick hardened and I had to ignore the need to drag her into the room in the back and fuck her.

I signaled Jasmine who appeared immediately. "Clear this off, please. And bring in their favorite."

With her usual efficiency, Jasmine stripped down the table to nothing, then cleaned it up and set it with clean plates and silverware as I typed a message to my right hand man, Ricardo. Once I clicked send, I put the phone back into my pocket and studied Autumn.

Her hand kept smoothing the non-existent wrinkles over the tablecloth. The brown in her eyes slowly started to fade back to her hazel color, and suddenly I realized hazel green became my new favorite color.

"Sorry, Alessio. We were just so excited." Branka broke the silence. "I didn't even think to check the phone."

"No matter," I told her. Jasmine came back with the food. "You two eat. Then Ricardo will be here to take you home, Branka." When terror entered her eyes, I added, "My home. Always there. You're not going back to him anymore."

Over ten fucking years since the Russo manor was her home and she still feared going back there. I'd never give up on her. She had to know that by now. Didn't she?

"Okay." She nodded. Autumn sat stiff in her chair, her gaze slightly unfocused.

"Autumn, eat something," I ordered her.

Her eyes met my gaze. "Is it true what your father said?" she questioned, her eyes on me.

"Yes."

"Did you know?" she asked in a low voice.

I could lie. I should lie. I couldn't lie. "Yes."

"Do you want something?" Fuck, that was a loaded question. I wanted her. With me. Willingly. But deep down, part of me knew that every wrong I had done would cause her to eventually walk away. So I put a contract in place.

"From?" I asked instead.

"From them. From me."

"From them, no. From you, yes," I answered as honestly as I could. Her cheeks turned crimson and I knew exactly where her mind went.

"Eat something," I told her. Branka was lost in her own world, staring at her phone.

"I don't understand," Autumn muttered. "Why would my parents keep something like that from me?"

Because they were better people than most of the ones I knew. I couldn't fault them for never wanting Autumn around men like me. We destroyed innocence and left blood in our wake.

"They protected you," I told her.

And I will protect you.

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CHAPTER 14

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AUTUMN



Foreboding slithered down my spine and I had no idea why.

I just knew that the way Alessio's father watched me wouldn't bode well for me. Call it intuition. In retrospect, I wished I'd have run and never looked back. But I didn't. I was too brave for my own good and I wanted more of Alessio.

So instead of getting up and leaving, I remained in my seat, trusting that when the time came, Alessio would protect me.

Ah, if only I knew better.

Alessio's man took Branka to his place while we found ourselves back in his penthouse. The moment we stepped inside of it, his hands were on me. Hungry and urgent.

Blood roared in my ears and drowned out everything, except for my heart and his and the soft rustle of our movements as we frantically undressed each other.

His suit jacket. Tie. Shirt. Belt.

My fingers trembled as I fumbled to unbutton his pants.

The sound of the zipper mixed with our shallow breathing. The dress pooled around my feet. Alessio's gaze roamed over my body, the molten silver of his eyes setting every molecule in my body aflame.

But Alessio's body was a sight to behold. With the light pouring from every window of the penthouse, he looked like a god of war. His broad, muscled shoulders marked with ink that his sophisticated suits usually hid. Those sculpted abs and a sexy V-cut.

My mouth dried at the sight of Alessio's long, hard, thick cock. I swept my tongue over my lips, wetting them. The anticipation of what was to come drummed inside me. I knew how he felt now and it only heightened this need pulsing between my thighs.

"Soft or hard?" I blinked in confusion. His gaze smoldered with so much heat, it seared through me. "Do you want to be fucked soft and slow or hard and fast?"

The dark purr of his voice promised both would be pleasurable. And there was something so damn hot about him letting me choose. I wanted it all. Hard. Slow. Fast.

I wanted to experience it all. Only with him.

His fingers glided over my collar bone, his touch soft, yet rough. Down my breasts and a shiver rolled through me, as lust blazed through me. He went lower and lower, until his finger brushed over my damp panties.

"Hard," I moaned.

He tore my underwear off with one tug, then his mouth latched onto my neck. I gasped and tilted my head, my fingers gripping his hair. His palm ran to my ribs, spanning my waist. His lips ran up my neck, teeth nipping my jaw before he came to my mouth.

He was unraveling me with his simple touch. I wanted to do the same to him. He grabbed the back of my neck and kissed me hard. Wet and messy. Wild and rough. That was who Alessandro Russo was.

And I fucking loved it. I wanted to make him feel good. I wanted to see him unravel for me and an idea sparked in my brain. I gently nudged him away. He stopped immediately, his chest rising and falling and his labored breathing matching mine.

"You okay?" The note of concern in his voice had warmth spilling into my chest.

My hands slid downward his abs, every single muscle of his tightening under my touch. Touching Alessio was a carnal sin all of its own. His smooth skin warm under my fingertips, tempting me to taste him.

"Yeah," I breathed. "I- I want to do something."

The insinuation was thick in the air, the meaning unmistakable as my fingers curled around his hard length. His gaze flicked to my face, the scent of him seeping into my lungs. It was enough to intoxicate me.

"You don't have to." His eyes darkened, reminding me of clouds right before a violent storm. It was thrilling, exhilarating, tempting to get lost in it. The air around us shifted into something thicker, heavier, more condensed and my heart thundered so hard, I feared it would leap out of my chest.

"I want to."

Before he could protest, not that he looked like he wanted to, I sank onto my knees before him and his gaze swam with turmoil and tension that radiated from every single inch of him.

"Have you done this before?" he asked through clenched teeth, his voice rough. His control tethered and it made me feel like a seductive temptress.

My lips curved. "I didn't say I was a saint," I murmured, watching his hard length already thick and dripping with pre-cum. My palms came to his thighs, my fingers curling with anticipation. I wanted to make him feel good. Yes, I'd done this before but never with someone like Alessio.

Nobody compared to Alessio.

His fingers fisted my hair and he tugged on them so tightly, my scalp burned. Fuck, even that felt good with him. With his free hand, he stroked his cock once, twice and my mouth watered.

This man was made for sex.

"Look at me," he demanded, forcing my face up. The heat of his gaze promised retribution to anyone who I dared give a blow job before. "I want their names," he gritted.

"No." My lips parted. "Are you going to fuck my mouth or are we going to talk?"

His gaze burned, his control slipping, and I fucking loved it. This could be my ultimate kryptonite. Seeing him unravel for me. He ran the crown of his cock over my lips and my tongue darted out to lick him, tasting his precum on my lips.

Heat blossomed between my clenching thighs and I could feel wetness slicking my skin.

I parted my mouth and slowly took him down my throat. Our gazes held as I took him deeper, pausing every few seconds to adjust. I could feel his muscles trembling under my palm and his control slowly shredding with each inch he thrust deeper into my throat.

His grip tightened on my hair.

"Fuck, Autumn." His tortured groan vibrated through me. I rubbed my thighs together trying to relieve the throbbing ache. I started moving and it was then that Alessio lost all control. He wrapped my hair around his fist and held my head in place as he rammed in and out of my mouth. Hard and fast.

His shoulders were rigid. The lines of his face tense. And I watched, mesmerized by the lust in his eyes as he kept thrusting in and out of my mouth. Tingles covered my spine, and wetness trickled down my inner thighs.

"That mouth is mine." He thrust in all the way. "You're not allowed to use those lips on anyone else. Understood?"

I nodded, my fingers buzzing with the need to touch myself and alleviate the ache between my legs. But I didn't. Because this was for Alessio.

I licked and sucked, settling into his rhythm. I flattened my tongue and lapped at him like it was the last thing I

would do in my life. He slid all the way down my throat again.

"Fuck." His groan vibrated through his penthouse and I hummed with satisfaction. "You're such a good little toy," he praised and the ache deepened. "I can smell your wet pussy, hungry for my cock."

God, I could come just from his filthy words.

Our gazes locked, my eyes watered from taking him in so deep. The ache between my thighs was unbearable and I finally gave into the temptation. I slid my hand between my legs and brushed my fingers over my drenched clit. Then I applied the firm pressure against my clit and grinding against my hand.

I moaned, the sound muffled with his cock thrusting in and out of my mouth. His half-lidded gaze was locked on me and his breaths came out heavy. Pleasure coiled higher and tighter with each passing second until Alessio abruptly pulled my head away from him.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. "What-"

Before I could finish the sentence, he picked me up and pushed me against the window, the entirety of Montréal stretching in front of us.

"I'm going to come with my cock buried deep inside your pussy," he rasped, his mouth hot against my ear. Rough. Demanding.

The glass cooled my heated skin, but it did nothing to ease this blaze inside me. Then he was inside me in one hard thrust, I screamed his name.

He stilled, his teeth grazing my earlobe. "Did I hurt you?"

My pussy clenched around him as he filled me to the hilt. The stretching sensation stung but felt so good. Despite our difference in sizes, we fit perfectly. He was so deep inside me, I could feel him in my stomach.

"It feels so good," I breathed. "I want more."

His fingers savagely gripped me by my hips and he pulled out slowly, only to pound into me hard.

"Your tight cunt is choking my cock," he rasped. "So fucking greedy."

Another thrust, and I soaked in every jerk of his hips with moans and incoherent whimpers of his name. My palms pressed against the glass and my breathing hard, fogging the window, I stared at the city as he fucked me.

Savagely. Brutally. Consuming.

"Alessandro," I begged. "Oh. My. God."

Our eyes met in the faint glass. It was surreal, barely visible. But it was there nonetheless. As he fucked me deep and hard, my cries filling every corner of his penthouse, I watched his face in the glass.

Possessive expression.

"I'm fucking you," he growled. "Not God. You scream my name."

And I did. His fingers dug into my hips, his length stretched my inner muscles as I took him deeper and harder. My nipples scraped against the cool glass and I watched his expression unravel for me in the glass through my half-lidded eyes.

Harsh breaths. Needy whimpers. Flesh slapping against flesh.

The slickness of his cock thrusting inside me.

"You take me so good," he praised, his brutal thrusts making it hard to process his words. "Your pussy was made for me. Just for me."

My gasping breaths fogged the window and my eyes closed as Alessio pounded me brutally. I was reaching higher and higher toward pleasure only he could give me.

"Alessandro, I need..." Another moan ripped through the air. He wrapped a fistful of my hair around his hand and pulled my head back so I had no choice but to turn my face. His mouth slammed into mine, and the whole time, he kept thrusting.

He captured my top lip between his, kissing and nipping with a sweet pull. A groan vibrated deep in his chest and straight into mine. His rough hands held me exactly how he wanted me. Vulnerable to him. But also protected.

"Please... please... " Sweet, hot pleasure built. I was so fucking close. "I need... "

"What do you need?" His harsh breaths matched my own.

"You." His mouth left mine, and he pressed his face against my throat while a satisfied groan left his chest. He angled his cock and went deeper inside me, hitting that most pleasurable spot. "Oh... ohhh... I'm..."

He did it again and my back arched, his fingers gripped my hips and slammed into me again and again, hitting my G-spot. He built the sensation higher and higher, stoking it hotter with each thrust until I saw stars. And like a crescendo, my orgasm spiraled out of control. The blood in my veins lit with sparks and sent a wave of electricity to the tip of my toes.

I screamed out his name and the pleasure stretched on and on until I felt lightheaded. My pussy clenched around his cock as he thrust in through my orgasm. Once. Twice. His muscles went taut against my back and he came with a loud groan, spilling inside me.

My body still floated somewhere between his penthouse and heaven as his cock throbbed inside me.

Alessio's arms wrapped around me from behind, his forehead resting against my shoulder and his mouth on my skin.

I felt like I had been fucked. Literally and figuratively.

My forehead pressed against the window, my breathing still hard, I murmured softly, "If I knew sex was this good, I would have had it sooner."

He pulled me by my hair, his hand caging my throat. "The sex is this good because it's *us*," he whispered hot into my ear. "Because I own you."

His claim should send an alert through me. It didn't. All I knew was that every single touch and taste of him sank so deep inside me that he might have already lodged himself into my heart.

"If you own me," I panted, my body pliable in his arms, "I own you too."

A pause.

"You got it." Goosebumps ran over my skin and a craving, *a need*, grew in my chest. He was quickly becoming someone important.

He turned me around and lifted me into his arms, then carried me to the bathroom. I wanted to stay with him forever. But there was a life waiting, the one I always wanted. Except now it didn't seem as enticing.

I caught a glimpse of us in the bathroom. Both of us naked. Him, larger than life. Me, small in his arms with disheveled hair and the look on my face that said I was thoroughly fucked and enjoyed it too.

Our gazes met in the mirror and my breath caught in my lungs. Something soft and vulnerable flickered in his gray ones.

"I like you," I whispered, although somewhere deep down I thought it might be so much deeper than that. But I wasn't ready to admit that to myself, never mind him.

He gently lowered me onto the counter. His lips brushed against mine, softly and in such contrast to our earlier rough, unhinged sex.

"I like you too."

My lips curved into a smile as I pressed our mouths together. Then he pulled back and he turned on the water. He poured a liquid into the bathwater and soon, the whole bathroom smelled like eucalyptus.

"Is that your last girlfriend's?" I asked dryly, jealousy biting at me.

A sardonic breath left him. "No, Branka's Christmas gift," he retorted wryly. "She thought I'd want women's

bath crap here.”

A choked laugh escaped me. “It’s not a bad idea. It’s becoming useful now.”

“She gave me that shit two years ago,” he grumbled. “Hopefully we don’t get a rash.”

“Well, you just made it appealing to take a bath with you,” I teased. Amusement entered his expression, but he said nothing.

I watched him pour the contents of the bottle into the bath. It was clear he never prepared a bath before because he dumped the whole bottle into the large tub.

He helped me into the tub and then slid behind me so I sat between his long, muscular legs. I leaned back into his chest and sighed.

“Better?”

“Much, thank you.”

His hand came to my shoulders and his fingers started massaging. I closed my eyes and enjoyed his tenderness. My muscles loosened with every passing second, relishing in this intimate moment with him.

My head fell back against his shoulder and my eyes fluttered closed. His hands lowered to my hips, then to my inner thighs.

“We should have taken it easy,” he murmured against my ear. “You’re new to this.”

I didn’t open my eyes. “I’m not complaining. Are you?”

His chest rumbled against mine. “Definitely not.”

His hands found their way between my legs as they parted of their own accord. His strong fingers massaged my aching thighs, rubbing circles and pressing against my muscles. He inched closer to my sensitive core, but each time I thought he’d touch me there, he’d stop. Then resume at a slower pace.

“When do you have to leave for your job?” His question surprised me, and for a moment, I remained silent.

“Another few days.”

His fingers inched up and cupped my sex. "This isn't over."

I turned my head to look at him over my shoulder. "What exactly?"

The intensity of his darkened features should warn me to be cautious. It doesn't. "You. Me. Us." His finger rubbed my clit, then slid inside my folds and a low moan filled the air, vibrating against the tiles. "I want your itinerary. I'll come and see you on your days off."

Fuck, I was melting. Whether from his words or his finger that lazily thrust in and out of me.

"Okay," I agreed. Maybe I should play coy but I saw no point in it. I wanted him. I wanted to see more of him. "Can I have your phone number?"

The smile he gave me had my heart fluttering like a newborn butterfly. "I'll message you when we get out of the tub. You save that number and memorize it."

I rolled my eyes, feigning annoyance but my happy smile ruined it. Alessio's hand was still cupping my pussy, his fingers expertly rubbing my clit.

"You're sore." His words seemed more for himself than for me.

"But I love your hands on me," I admitted softly. It wasn't something new for him. He could see that it did with each moan and clenching of my thighs.

"Are you excited?" His mouth on my neck and hands on my body made it hard to think. His hand was no longer on my sex but he still kept me cocooned in his arms.

"Like at the prospect of having sex again or- "

His deep laugh caught me by surprise, and I twisted my neck to see it on his face. God, that man should have babies because he was hot as sin.

"I mean, are you excited to travel and take photos?"

I grinned and turned back, then leaned against him. "I am. I love doing it. Freezing moments into something that

everyone can experience. I'm lucky that this opportunity came along. It's a once in a lifetime one."

Silence followed and I wondered what he was thinking. "Did you always want to be—" I didn't know how to ask. "Ummm. Did you want to be a fireman when you were a kid or something like that?"

He chuckled again. God, I fucking loved making him laugh. Maybe I'd make it my purpose to make him laugh more. Hashtag goals - take that social media.

"Fireman, huh?"

Okay, maybe I couldn't see him as a fireman. "Pilot? Doctor? I don't know. What do boys dream of becoming?"

I held my breath, waiting. I didn't know why. It was a simple question, but it felt like something so much more. Touching a wound or going to a place nobody was allowed.

"I just wanted to stay alive." Such a simple answer, yet it spoke volumes. And my heart hurt for him. Branka hinted at a hard childhood. I got a sense Alessio's was even harder. My hands curled around his strong ones and I pulled them tighter around me.

"I'm glad you are," I whispered, turning my head to press a kiss on his neck. God, he smelled good. Even with this crazy eucalyptus bath scent, he still smelled like him. Sandalwood and spice.

We stayed in the bath for another few minutes before we both started to get antsy. Together we climbed out of the tub, and he wrapped me in the towel first. Then he sat me on the counter before he wrapped a towel around his waist.

A regretful sigh left me, while amusement entered his eyes. "What?"

"I love seeing you naked."

He laughed. A warm, deep laugh that was so sexy it had my toes curling with happiness.

"I love seeing you naked more," he responded. My cheeks turned red but I made no move to discard the towel.

I wasn't shy but I wasn't exactly walking around the penthouse naked type either.

So I sat on the counter, while he stood in front of the sink and started to apply shaving cream to his face. I leaned back on my hands and watched his sure movements. His muscles gracefully moved with each motion.

"Want me to help you?" I offered and surprise flickered in his eyes. When he didn't refuse, I tugged him gently to me, then placed my legs on either side of him. He handed me the razor and I leaned closer to him, putting the blade to his throat. He tensed. "Don't worry, Alessandro. I like your throat and pulse too much to let anything happen to you."

A corner of his lips lifted.

"That's comforting," he murmured, barely moving his lips. He didn't look worried so I started to shave him.

"I like your stubble," I mumbled as I gently pulled the razor down his jaw. "Gives you a bad boy vibe." I repeated the movement, my eyes focused on the task at hand and careful not to cut him.

"I don't like to see the marks my stubble leaves on your skin."

My movement stopped and my eyes flicked up. "It leaves a mark?"

"Yes, red marks. Like someone hurt you."

I resumed shaving him, my brows furrowed. "You bit me on my shoulder. That leaves a mark, not your stubble."

"I bit you to mark you, so everyone knows it's me fucking you and not to touch you. That's different."

My lips tugged up. "You don't have to mark me. It's not like I'll be running to another man."

"If you do, he's a dead man."

I rolled my eyes, but the truth was I loved his possessiveness.

"Your tattoos, do they mean something?" I asked, changing the subject. His breathing stilled for a second

before resuming. "Looks like a lion and a crown." My fingers trailed down to his navel area. A tattoo of a skull with eagle wings.

I wanted to ask him about the scars, but I didn't want to bring up any painful memories. So I stuck to the ink, and if he wanted to tell me, he would.

"It is." I never stopped my movement, but my heart paused its beat, waiting. "A lion will tear down enemies who wear the crown. He's the king of the jungle, but he'll always worship his lioness."

I wanted to be his lioness, but I couldn't bring myself to admit it. Not to him.

"Are you the lion?" I questioned instead.

He shrugged.

"Who wears the crown?" I asked softly. He remained quiet, but the tension in his muscles didn't escape me. My first guess would be maybe he had something against his father's ruling, but I couldn't be sure. "Do you want to wear the crown?"

"Not really." I believed him.

"And the skull?" I murmured, tracing it with my fingers.

"Represents death."

"You have a lot of enemies?"

"Only two that matter."

I finished shaving him, then straightened, meeting his guarded gaze on me.

"I'm surprised any enemy of yours remains breathing," I said casually as I discarded the razor and grabbed a hand towel to wipe any remains of shaving cream.

My fingers trailed lower to his ribs that were free of tattoos, only smooth, tanned skin.

"One day," he murmured, then kissed me, lightly nipping my bottom lip and leaving me breathless. He pulled back, then ran a thumb across my cheek. "I like you in my home."

My chest warmed. I scooted closer to him, feeling his hard-on and that familiar ache settled between my thighs. I

leaned forward, my lips parting his and his tongue brushed against mine.

"I want you again," I breathed as a shiver rolled down my spine.

"Insatiable," he stated, his voice hoarse.

Before I could process what was happening, he pushed inside me so deeply that a gasp tore from my throat.

This time he fucked me slow and long, our lips inches apart. He thrust deep inside of me, his fist in my hair, holding me in place. It made this feel more intimate and raw. Exposed.

"You're my fucking property," he rasped into my ear and my chest blossomed. "I'm going to ruin you for any other man." My body shuddered with his lips pressed against my ears, his voice sending a shiver down my spine. "Your cunt is strangling my dick. My personal heaven."

It was all it took for my body to unravel and pleasure to burst through me. I'd never be able to get this man out of my system. Not with his dirty words ringing in my ears. Not with the craving I felt deep inside me.

Afterwards, he carried me to bed and we talked about plans. His. Mine. Ours. He'd meet me in each country, take me to dinner. We'd visit a temple. Anything I wanted, he said.

"Alessio?"

"Hmmm."

"I don't think we should say anything to Branka," I whispered. I kneeled between his open legs and sensed him tense. My hands reached out to cup his cheeks. "It's not what you think." When his brows shot up, I explained. "I don't want Branka to think she's going to have less of you or less of me."

I had no idea if I was making sense. But he nodded.

"Okay." But something in his gaze told me he wasn't happy about it.

He shifted off the bed while I remained in my spot, wrapped up in the comforter and watching him get dressed. I found his every move sexy and so goddamn fascinating.

When he reached for his signature coal black suit, I stopped him. "Wear jeans." His hand froze midair and his eyes of stormy clouds met mine. He cocked an eyebrow as if he expected an explanation.

"Your butt looks good in them," I added, smiling and ogling his ass.

In his powerful stride, he walked over to his closet and dug out a pair of jeans and put them on.

"These okay?" he asked, a hint of humor in his voice.

I grinned. "Much better."

He shook his head, letting out a sardonic breath between his teeth. Maybe he thought I was ridiculous. But then, he was appeasing me so it couldn't be so.

Next, he slid on a T-shirt. Watch followed.

I never thought watching a guy put a watch on would be sexy, but with Alessio Russo it was. His hands were as sexy as the rest of him and I couldn't get enough of them. My eyes flickered to his face to find him watching me.

"What?" I asked him.

The devastatingly gorgeous smile that spread on his face made something hot and hesitant flicker to life in my stomach and my chest. I desperately wanted him to kiss me again. He was like a magnet, like an addiction, that I couldn't get enough of and I wasn't sure that it'd bode well for me.

He took five long strides and was back by the bed. As he sat down, the mattress tilted and rolled me over to him and his arms came around me.

"Send me your schedule now," he demanded. "I'll book my pilot right away. This is far from over."

A stupid grin spread on my face and schoolgirl giddiness filled me.

Much later in life, I'd blame it on my naïveté and romantic ideals. But for right now, I beamed like the sun.

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CHAPTER 15

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AUTUMN



We sat in Alessio's McLaren, parked one street over from my parents'. It was almost ten at night and I worried maybe my parents were still awake. I couldn't get enough of him, so like a horny teenager I straddled his hips, the wheel at my back.

"One more kiss," I begged.

He let out a rough breath, watching me lazily. But he appeased me, his hand gripping the back of my neck and pressing my mouth to his. "You're going to ruin me."

I smiled against his lips. "Ditto," I murmured, grinding against him. The friction between our bodies was so heightened, all we needed was a match to ignite it. "Now kiss me."

I ran my hands up his chest, over his neck and into his thick hair, tangling my fingers into his hair. My nails scraped against his scalp.

Grabbing my hips, he pulled me closer and his hard erection pressed against my hot entrance.

We both groaned. I met his eyes, the steady pools of metal. And then he kissed me. Lazy and slow. Slipped his tongue into my mouth and pulled my bottom lip between his teeth. His kiss was so deep and consuming, it made my head spin.

His hand at my nape tightened and the hazy rush of lust pooled in my lower stomach. I moaned into his mouth. He ended the kiss too soon.

"Fuck." His voice was rough, hoarse, like he was on the brink of control. His hands moved everywhere - down my spine, up my hips, over my breasts. "We'll end up fucking in the car if we stay here," he rasped, nipping at my earlobe. "I'll walk you in."

I chewed on my bottom lip. I wanted to prolong our time together and eventually my parents would catch on to who I was seeing. But I had to talk to them about the Corsican mafia and this supposed connection we had to them.

I sighed. I wasn't ready for it. "You can't avoid it forever," he noted softly, wrapping my strand around his finger.

It didn't surprise me that he read me so well.

"You don't have to walk me to the door," I murmured, brushing my lips.

"I'm not letting you walk alone in the dark," he grumbled.

Pushing away from him, I tugged my dress down. He helped me adjust my dress, his touch soft. Then he opened the door, helping me step out of his car. He followed right behind me.

Taking my hand into his, like we've done this thousands of times, our fingers interlocked and we walked down the street in silence.

We stopped ten feet away from my parents' white picket fence.

"You saved my number?" he demanded to know.

"I have." I lifted on my tiptoes and reached for his mouth. "You better have mine saved too. With little sexy symbols next to my name."

His laugh rumbled and made me smile. "Sexy symbols next to your name. Duly noted."

One more kiss.

Then I rushed inside with a last glance over my shoulder. He stood in the same spot, his hands tucked into his pockets, watching me. I waved my hand.

"Autumn." My mother's voice startled me and I whipped around to find my mother watching me. "Who are you waving at?"

"Nobody."

"You and Branka have a good time?" she asked as she shut the door behind us.

The memory of our unsuccessful lunch had my smile falling. "Maman?"

"Yes, ma chérie."

"Are we connected to the Corsican mafia?" My mother froze on the spot. Okay, I could have done a better job leading in.

"Where did you hear that?" she asked, her voice small.

I didn't want to tell her I found out from Alessio's father. It would upset her if she knew I spoke a word with that asshole.

"So it's true?"

"Christian," she yelled, a slight panic in her voice.

"Maman, it's ten at night," I scolded her in a hushed tone. "Dad's probably sleeping."

"Nope, here. Wide awake," he showed up at the doorway of the kitchen. "There's leftover dinner, baby. Are you hungry?"

I shook my head. I had dinner with Alessio already, but of course, I couldn't say that. I shifted on my feet, back and forth, avoiding looking at dad's eyes. He was always very perceptive and stupidly I worried he'd see in my eyes the truth. That I was mad about Alessio Russo.

"Your daughter asked about our connection to the Corsican mafia!" Maman said pointedly.

The air stilled and the two exchanged a glance. Silence stretched, tension rose.

"Oh my gosh, it's true," I gasped in a low voice. "How- " I pushed my hands through my hair. "What- "

"Maybe it's best we go sit down?" Maman recommended.

God, was the shit so bad that we had to sit down? Dad's face was harder to read than Maman's but neither one of their expressions soothed the nerves inside me.

The three of us made our way into the living room. Pictures of my happy childhood stared at us from every corner of the room. Three of us at the beach. Three of us on an alligator farm. Visiting Paris, Maman's favorite place in the world.

I sat down on a loveseat and crossed my legs, anticipation building.

"Did they approach you?" Father broke the silence.

"Who?" I asked, confused.

"The Blanchets." I shook my head.

"They're alive?" My eyes kept darting between my parents, trying to read what was coming.

Maman took a deep breath in and let out a heavy sigh. "Maybe we should start at the beginning," she recommended.

"Goddamn it, I didn't want our daughter worrying about shit like this," Father grumbled. Both of them were seated together, as always, Father holding Mom's hand. His gaze, so similar to mine, came to me. "I guess we'll start with, yes, it's true. Maman's father was head of the Corsican mafia."

"He still is," she pointed out.

Father rolled his eyes and it would have been comical if the subject was anything but this. "Yes, he still is. Anyhow, they were my case. To bust them for drug distribution they had going on between France and the States." I waited patiently. Maman always said they met while she sang in a bar. "I'd monitored the Blanchet family for weeks. One night, I see this girl climbing over the wall and jumping

down before disappearing into the night." Father's eyes flicked to Maman's and they instantly softened. It was always like that with them. "I followed her to a bar. It turned out your mother had a job, under a false name, playing the piano and singing in a bar. We fell in love, but I knew there'd be no keeping my job and getting the woman of my dreams. So I quit my job, but maintained all the tools that helped me do it."

"Huh?"

"Baby, I developed a software that allowed me to tap into the home of the president. It was a useful tool to have to keep your mom safe."

"I think I'm impressed," I murmured.

"Don't be, because once your mom and I decided to elope, we brought trouble to our doorstep. Not only from the underworld but also from the secret service."

My eyes flickered to their hands. They always touched each other, held hands, kissed. Like they couldn't get enough of each other. But now as I watched my mom's knuckles turn white as she gripped Father's hand, I realized he was her strength too.

"What happened?" I whispered, as if I was afraid someone would hear us.

"We left that world," Dad said. "I left my job. And we ran. Your grandparents didn't take that lightly. Neither did my superiors. They hunted us. At first, we did well losing them. We moved every week from one spot to the next. But once you were conceived, we slowed down." Maman and Dad shared an anguished look. "I got too cocky. I thought I had a handle on them. I monitored both criminals and special agents coming after me. I thought myself invincible, but then, your grandfather's men caught up to us."

A soft whimper left Mom's lips and my eyes darted to her. When neither one of them said a thing, I almost didn't want to know what happened next.

"And then?" I asked hesitantly.

Mom swallowed, opened her mouth and then closed it. She shook her head. "I-I can't."

Father nodded as if he understood. "It's the reason you were born in August, instead of November, baby."

Maman visibly paled and her lips quivered, while my eyes darted wide-eyed between my parents.

I blinked. "I don't follow."

"They induced your mother's labor and then cut her open. To get their hands on you, Autumn." Father's voice rang in my ears. I comprehended the words but for the life of me, I couldn't process them.

"But why?"

"To ensure I complied with their demands," he explained. "They held the woman I loved and my unborn child. I had information on them that could put their whole organization under. The first piece of information I sent to the Attorney General was what pushed them over the edge. It was what had them cut her open so they'd make us pay."

There was one thing for sure. I never wanted to meet my grandparents. Fucking ever!

"If they had Maman and me, how did you get us back?" I rasped.

Dad pushed his hand through his salt and pepper hair. "I gambled." Then seeing I didn't follow, he continued, "I had nothing to lose. Without your mom and you, there was nothing for me in life. So I threatened them. Either they give me the two of you back or I dump all their crime, details and evidence, into the press. They had connections with state officials but not the public. If people saw the crimes they committed, there would have been an uproar."

"That's not a bad blackmail," I muttered. "Smart."

Dad shook his head. "Not really, but it was all I had. They knew if I leaked it all, it'd impact your mother too. There were illegal dealings that were in her name so it'd take her under too."

My eyes snapped to Maman. "You were a criminal too?" I gasped with shock.

"I helped my father once or twice in some dealings," she admitted, shame on her face. "I was in line to take over his empire, and he felt I should be strong and ruthless. Just like a man."

My mouth agape, I stared at my mother. The gentle mother who loved to sing and always jumped in to help anyone. I couldn't see the lethal, ruthless woman that could lead a criminal organization.

She must have seen it on my face. "I wish it wasn't so, *ma chérie*," she murmured softly. "But that was the world I was born into. It was what I had seen growing up. I could kill a man nine different ways by the time I was fifteen and make it look like an accident."

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

"B-but you can't even cook?" I said for no good reason. Dad chuckled softly, but he patted Maman's hand as if he worried my words upset her.

"Now, *chérie*, I am getting better with eggs," she protested. "And the toast is no longer burned when you get it." I half-nodded my head. That much was true but people couldn't survive on toast. "Cooking wasn't something that was deemed important in my world. At least not for me, in line to take my father's organization."

"What made you want to leave?"

Maman's eyes darted to my father and there was so much love in it that I felt myself choking up. I always thought my father would kill for my mother. Now I realized, it was also true the other way around. Maman would kill for him.

"Your father," she murmured softly. "In his eyes, I saw what my life could be. More than the violence I grew up seeing. More than an arranged marriage."

I blinked. "An arranged marriage?"

She nodded. "Yes. My parents formed an alliance through an arranged marriage. So did their parents before them. It's a way of life. The husbands have many affairs. Some are more violent than others. Maman was lucky. My father wasn't as brutal to his wife as other men, but he did have a wandering eye."

"Was the story about how you met real?" I asked. This was information overload.

"Yes, we met at the pub I played at. Nobody knew me there. I always loved to play and sing. It was one thing I got from my own maman. The rest of me was shaped by my father. But the moment I saw your father, everything became background noise. It was like life restarted and he loved me despite all the ugly things I've done. He showed me how it could be - for us, for our future."

"Jesus, I don't know if it's a love story or- " My fingers pushed through my hair, very much like my dad did when he was stressed out. "Or maybe a horror story."

Maman smiled softly. "It's definitely the greatest story of my life."

My chest warmed at seeing the love. No wonder they couldn't keep their hands off each other. They went through some obstacles to be together.

"So how did you get Maman and me back, Dad?" I asked him, going back to the story.

Maman and dad frowned at the same time and for the first time, I saw fear flicker in their gazes.

It was Maman who answered. "I want you to remember that we never had the intention of letting them have you. Ever!"

Her words made no sense but I nodded nonetheless.

"We made a deal, ma chérie," Maman said, her fingers clutching dad. Or was he clutching hers? I couldn't tell anymore, although one thing was for certain. Alone they were weak, but together, they were a rock. Strong.

"What kind of deal?"

“On your eighteenth birthday, they would start preparing you to take over the Corsican mafia. Either you would rule it or someone they designate for you to marry would.”

I shot up from my spot like someone had burned me.

“What?” I screeched. “They can’t decide who I marry!” Then the full meaning sunk in. “On my eighteenth birthday? But that was four years ago.” They both nodded. I felt like something was missing here. “Are they dead?”

“No,” Maman answered. “They said they are not ready.”

“They are not ready,” I repeated slowly. This conversation was getting weirder by the second.

“I think maybe after all these years, my father realized it’s best to let his nephews’ rule.”

“My cousins?” I muttered. Maman nodded. “I guess that’s good.” I sank back into my seat. I didn’t know what to make of all this. “What if they change their mind and demand I—” I searched for words. “I can’t be a criminal,” I muttered. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

Maman jumped up and came to my seat. Just like when I was a little girl, she sat next to me and hugged me.

“If they come for you, then we’ll disappear. We know how to do that. They won’t have you. I love the woman you have become. The little girl that always wanted to save the world is finally on the move and I won’t let anyone stop you. Please don’t hate me, chérie.”

A lump formed in my throat and my eyes stung. I wrapped my hands around her. “I could never hate you or Dad.”

If anything I appreciated them even more.

CHAPTER 16

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ALESSIO



Tap. Tap. Tap.

I tapped my fingers against my desk as I studied photos Autumn posted on her Instagram. She was in Afghanistan.

For the past two months, I'd followed her all over the world.

Kuala Lumpur. Sydney. Tokyo. Taiwan. Cambodia. And now Afghanistan.

Pictures of the sunrise from the top of Petronas Twin Towers. Sydney Opera House. Sensō-ji in Tokyo. Street food in Taiwan. Angkor Wat in Cambodia. The contrast of desert and mountains in Afghanistan.

I made it to each destination every weekend. To see both of them. My sister and Autumn lived their best life and enjoyed every single minute of it. Me, not so much. I had aged about five years in the past two months worrying about the two of them.

I sat in my Abu Dhabi office, counting down the hours when I'd see Autumn. She and my sister were scheduled to arrive tonight. I had already scheduled their pick up and instructed my driver to bring Autumn to my room. Knowing Branka, she'd be too tired to see me or talk to me until tomorrow.

My phone beeped, signaling a text message and I slid it open.

“Fuck,” I grumbled. The message was from Father. What the fuck was he doing here?

There should be no reason for him to be here. I had businesses here, he didn’t. He barely held on to his connections in Montréal.

Ignoring his message, I got back to work. I’d be damned if I’d see him tonight. I’d be counting hours until tonight.

I’d be seeing my girl.

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CHAPTER 17

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AUTUMN



The last two months were bliss.

It was time to admit it, I was in love with Alessandro Russo. Hard and fast. There was no turning back from it.

True to his word, Alessio met me almost every week.

Tousled sheets. Hands on skin. Glistening sweat.

A shudder rolled down my spine. Just thinking about him sent hot desire swimming through my veins. It had only been two weeks since I saw him and it felt like two years. I craved his touch every night and his smile every morning.

Every single country I had seen so far was incredible. Magical and beautiful. Because Alessandro Russo came. Even when he could only spend twenty-four hours with me, he made a long haul trip to come and see me. It was just us.

I had been busy with work, but on the weekends, he'd find a way to get to wherever we were and he'd spend time with his sister and me. But the nights were only for me.

There was nothing I loved more than watching Alessio undress as I sat on the edge of the bed. He'd unclasp that expensive, fancy watch and put it on the hotel dresser. Then his cufflinks would come next. Then his tie and I'd hold my breath as he'd work the knot loose. His strong

fingers would start on his shirt buttons and it was usually where I'd cave and reach for him.

My movements weren't as graceful as his. I'd fumble with the buttons, eager to see his abs. I'd press my mouth to his chest, skimming my lips over his skin. When I'd feel his scars, he no longer stiffened. I'd spend extra time on them, kissing them, licking them.

I loved him so fucking much that it borderline hurt. But it was a good kind of ache. So I let it hurt. I could feel his hands on me even now. His fingers fisted in my hair as I kissed a path over every inch of his skin. I'd work my way down lower and lower, until I'd take him in my mouth.

And seeing Alessandro unravel for me had become my newest addiction.

Right alongside the stolen moments we shared all over the world.

The two of us under a cherry blossom tree in Tokyo. The two of us in the Sydney Opera House. The two of us in Batu Caves, then eating at the Central Market in Kuala Lumpur surrounded by al fresco ambiance.

Ladies eyed him everywhere we went. But his eyes never wavered and remained on me. If I thought Alessio looked good in suits or jeans, it didn't compare to the way he looked in black shorts and a white polo t-shirt. It highlighted his tall, muscular frame, gave hints to his bad boy vibes and tattoos hidden under that white polo.

No matter what he wore, he always finished the look with black aviator glasses.

I glanced around to ensure Branka hadn't changed her mind and decided to follow me. She tended to disappear during our downtime. Probably playing matchmaker for everyone we met, but it worked out perfectly. It gave me more time with her brother. The rest of our working group stayed at another hotel. We had the luxury of staying here only thanks to Alessio.

A slither of guilt snaked through my veins. My parents still didn't know. Neither did Branka. I should tell my best friend I was sleeping with her brother. Or dating. This was definitely dating. My lips curved into a soft smile. Who knew Alessio was the dating kind?

I rushed through the lobby of the Shangri-La Hotel in Abu Dhabi that buzzed with life. And so many different nationalities. It was like a mecca for people of various nationalities blending in. Some women covered their hair with hijab, others had it flowing. Some men wore traditional long kandura and ghutra while others wore suits.

I entered the elevator, excitement rising with each floor. *Bing*. Somewhere in the far corner of my mind, I realized music was playing. Soft elevator music. *Bing*. My lips curved into a soft smile.

The last time soft music played, Alessio and I danced on the streets of Kyoto in Japan. Maman always preached Paris was the city of love. To me it was Kyoto. Somewhere in the distance some traditional sad music played in soft tunes, but I had never been as happy as in that moment. The mountain landscape that surrounded the city washed the cobble streets in autumnal reds, yellows and oranges. We walked through the quiet streets, light drizzle covering our hair.

Alessio was so tall, his head brushed against some of the rooftops. The rain drizzled and the street was empty but the tunes played in perfect harmony with the rain. Before I knew it, my hands wrapped around Alessio's waist and I made him dance. "For my Instagram picture," I told him as I snapped a photo of our feet against the wet ground, autumn leaves, and cherry petals.

Bing.

It was for me. For us. He appeased me, our bodies slowly swaying. We danced as the raindrops rolled down his face and my heart shuddered with happiness.

Bing. I was on Alessio's floor.

I rushed out of the elevator eagerly. My heart floated on a cloud while a happy smile danced on my face. My eyebrow furrowed, usually Alessio waited for me in front of the elevator.

Because I can't waste an extra second to see you, he said.

No matter. I rushed down the hallway. There was only one room up here. The Presidential Suite.

But with each step that I took, a dread in the pit of my stomach grew. Ignoring it, I took another step. And another.

Cracked hotel door.

I held my breath. What if someone had come after Alessio? He warned me of his enemies. His father's. His friend's.

None of it deterred me.

Another soft step and I pushed the door wide open.

I blinked once. Twice. Three times.

It took a fraction of a single breath for my heart to shatter into a million pieces. For the bleeding to start. My stomach lurched. An invisible knife clawed its daggers into my chest and refused to let go. I'd bleed out. In a daze, my eyes lowered to the floor, almost expecting to see pieces of my heart around me. There was nothing.

Yet, the pain was unlike anything else I had ever experienced. It clawed at my chest, cut me open and left me bleeding. A scream bubbled in my throat but I couldn't quite manage the strength to make it known.

Your eyes turn brown when you're sad, Alessio said once, the stupid words echoing in my mind as hot tears stung and burned.

I stood frozen as I watched Alessio, sprawled on the ground and a woman between his legs, bobbing her head up and down. The coal black hair fell down her back. Alessio didn't grip it like he had when I kneeled in front of him.

Bile rose in my throat. I was stupid. Just another soft body to him, while he was *everything* to me. How many women had he fucked since we started dating? This time, I snickered at the notion. We were never dating. I was just a stupid woman.

Heed the warnings of your parents. My mother said she didn't want to be part of that world. Men in it lied, cheated, and killed. Her father had done it to her mother, Maman wanted something better. So did I.

Except, Alessio felt so right. Like an extension of me. When he touched me, my body melted. When he was around me, I felt complete. But I guess the joke was on me.

I couldn't watch anymore. I couldn't be here.

The light in my soul dimmed. The pain in my heart made it hard to think. To feel anything else. But I knew I had to get out of here.

I turned on my heels and headed back for the elevator. I couldn't stand there and watch that man for another second.

I never wanted to see Alessio Russo again.

IT WASN'T until I got back to my room that my body collapsed.

Sobs shook my body as I slid down the hotel door and sank to the floor. The flood of tears and my chest clenched so fucking bad that it made it hard to breathe.

The image of Alessio's face while that woman pleasured him tormented me. Slack jaw. Closed eyes. He looked so fucking relaxed while the pain clawed at my chest watching another woman's mouth on the man I love. It felt like someone was ripping out pieces of my heart and shredding my soul with a grinder.

I squeezed my eyes trying to erase the image of Alessio's face as he laid on that floor.

This agony tore at my insides. My heart had splintered into a thousand sharp pieces, cutting me on the inside. It hurt so fucking much that I expected blood to stain my skin at any moment.

I drew my knees to my chest and buried my head against my knees.

The thought of him, only a few floors up, sent a shiver down my spine.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I'm stupid, My mind chanted. *I'm so fucking stupid.*

I'd known the age difference between us would eventually bring an end, but I was too caught up in the excitement of falling in love. For the first time.

Since the day he barged into my pink and frilly bedroom, I had waited for him. Nobody had ever made my body buzz by their sheer presence. It only took him a single look to awaken something dormant inside of me and I was his.

Forever his.

Through gasping sobs, I attempted to draw oxygen into my lungs. I couldn't.

I was so fucking scared I'd choke on my own sobs. My body shook. My ribs hurt. And my throat squeezed so painfully, I couldn't breathe.

A knock.

I instantly swallowed my sobs. What if it was Alessio? Did he see me?

Another knock.

"Autumn?" I heard Branka's voice. Another knock followed. "Open the door, Autumn. I can hear you."

I didn't want to move. I couldn't explain to her what I had seen. This grief was swallowing me whole. I had to pull myself out.

The door shook and I shifted away from it so Branka could enter. Every fiber of me hurt. My muscles. My

organs. Everything.

But most of all my heart and I didn't know the first thing about how to patch it up.

"Oh my gosh." Branka's arms wrapped around me, running soothing circles on my back. "What happened? I thought you went to see your mysterious stranger."

I leaned my head against her chest and another wave of choking sobs came. I couldn't breathe. I needed him. My stupid heart wanted him even after what I'd just seen.

There wasn't enough glue in this world to piece my heart back together. But Alessandro Russo had another thing coming if he thought I'd leave Abu Dhabi without doing some damage to him.

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CHAPTER 18

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ALESSIO



I woke up with a familiar taste in my mouth.

The kind I hadn't had to endure for almost two decades.

Panic. Shame. Disgust.

I blinked, the numbness in my limbs and the blackout in my memory confirming my suspicion that I'd been drugged.

When I got my hands on who dared to do this, I'd fucking kill them. I'd tear them limb from fucking limb.

It couldn't be my father. He wouldn't dare. Besides, I hadn't seen him.

I waited until my sight cleared before I glanced at the clock.

Nineteen hundred hours. Military time.

It was seven at night.

Autumn. She should be here by now. I inhaled deeply. There was no scent of her. Usually her fall scent lingered in the air long after she was gone. It remained on my skin, on my clothes, and on my hair.

Nothing. Only a heavy Chanel No. 5 that I despised.

Foreboding slammed into me. Right along with the sheer terror.

I shot up, bile burning my throat like acid. I rolled right on time to throw up whatever lingered in my stomach, retching up a thin stream of vomit. Just like before.

I paused, letting the room settle around me. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled in warning. I took two steps into the bedroom of the hotel suite. She wasn't there. Bathroom. Not there.

Ignoring the black spots in my vision, I rushed down the stairs to Branka and Autumn's floor. The whole elevator ride down, blind panic slithered through my veins like poison. All kinds of scenarios played in my mind.

Did they get my woman? Did they get my sister?

I banged on the hotel door. "Autumn!" Nothing. Branka's door was right next to it. "Branka!"

Still nothing.

I banged again. "Open the fucking door!"

Because the alternative was unimaginable.

Branka's door swung open. My eyes roamed over my sister's short frame. She stared at me suspiciously, but she was unharmed. Relief slammed into me. She was safe.

"What are you doing, Alessio?" Branka hissed. "We were supposed to have lunch, not fucking dinner! You stood me up. Your own sister."

The fog in my brain had to go. Lunch with Branka. That was tomorrow. Tonight was supposed to be my night with Autumn.

"Our lunch is tomorrow." My voice came out calmer than I felt.

As my sister's eyes roamed over my state, I could feel it all. My tie was crooked. My hair was a rumpled mess. No jacket. My shirt was half out of my pants.

The worried look on my little sister's face didn't bode well. "No, Alessio. That was today."

My jaw flexed. "Where is your friend?"

Branka flicked a glance at the door next to her own room. "She checked out today. She went to stay with our crew."

"Where?"

Branka's delicate brows furrowed. "It doesn't really matter," she said. "She took an extra assignment and flew out today."

My stomach tightened. What the fuck happened yesterday?

I let stillness wash over me. It wouldn't do Branka any good if I lost my shit. "You want to grab dinner together?" I offered, hoping she'd say no.

Dinners in Abu Dhabi were later due to the extreme heat. We still had another two hours before they'd start serving dinner.

"Sure."

"Downstairs restaurant," I clipped. "Two hours."

I turned around to leave when Branka's hand closed around my wrist. Or half of it. "Alessio, what happened?" My sister studied me with a worried expression. "I've never seen you like this."

Because she was still a baby the last time someone drugged me.

"I'll see you downstairs," I said.

The moment I was back in my hotel room, I dialed Autumn's cell number.

No answer.

I had to hear her voice. Then I'd know she was safe. Know she was fine. Desperation to hear her voice settled heavy in my chest. Almost as if someone sat on my chest with the intent to end my lungs.

I dialed her again. Then again. And again. And again.

"What do you want, Alessio?" I froze at the sound of her voice. It was different from before. Her voice wavered on my name.

"Are you okay?" She was my rock. I'd been obsessed with Autumn Corbin for four years and fear knotted in my chest with the thoughts of losing her now.

Her humorless laugh was a stab into my heart, but she didn't answer.

"I need to see you," I said, desperation lacing my voice. A strange sensation burned in my chest and behind my eyes.

"And I don't need to see *you*." Her words pierced me straight through my chest. A knife in the heart would hurt less.

My heart shattered around me and this time, there'd be no Autumn to mend the pieces.

"Please, Autumn." My voice was twisted with the rawness of my emotions.

"After what happened, I never want to see you again, Alessio." My heart cracked at her words. The knife in my chest twisted deeper and deeper. I thought a small sob sounded over the line but I must have misheard it because her next words were calm. "Don't call me. Don't text me. Don't follow me on social media."

The line went dead right along with my heart.

I was alone until her. Now I'd be alone for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 19

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ALESSIO



I stared at the message.

Three months of nothing and now this. *She* wanted to see me.

Can we meet please? It's important. I'm in Europe for a week. Just let me know where.

Three fucking months of nothing. Dead silence. Then she fucking sends me this message.

And like a love-struck puppy I was ready to run to her. It fucking killed me not to respond. I'd been staring at the message for the past two hours.

Pathetic.

I glanced at my calendar. I had some *business*, more like a hunt, in London in two days' time. I could fool myself into thinking I wouldn't see her, but if she'd ask me to go to a goddamn war zone today, I'd drop it all and run.

I shot off a reply with the address of my place in London.

Leaving my home office, I went in search of a drink. I needed a stiff one. My footsteps echoed against the black marble floors that reflected my soul and my mood. I hated my bedroom. There were still a few things that sat on the nightstand from the last time she spent the night at my penthouse - a hair tie, her ring, and a travel size perfume.

"Maybe she wants that girl shit back," I muttered to the empty glass. I had no fucking idea when I poured the drink.

I watched the brownish liquid swish around the ice. It reminded me of her eyes when she was sad or scared. That fucking color. I'd have to switch to another poison. Maybe some fucking pink girly drink.

I downed the drink, the liquid bitter in my throat. Or maybe that was just me. Bitterness and numbness swallowed me whole.

It was ironic what a few months could do to a man. She brought a light to my life and then extinguished it, taking my heart and soul with her.

"A little thief," I grumbled. She couldn't have left it at that fucking five million dollar tab she left behind. She had to take my heart along too. Little Autumn Corbin left me a surprise as I checked out of the hotel in Abu Dhabi. Apparently, she convinced the staff I insisted on paying everyone's fucking bill.

As a thank you because the staff has been so accommodating to your needs, the receptionist beamed but a flicker of worry resided in her eyes. I could have so fucked them all up, but I was too goddamn tired. So I paid the bill.

Five million dollars for fuckers I had never met.

And still I couldn't be mad at Autumn.

My bedroom door opened soundlessly and I sank into the same chair I used to watch her sleep our first night together. The room was dark, her soft scent still lingered in the air. Or maybe it was just my fucking imagination playing tricks on me.

I tipped my head back and closed my eyes.

I could force her to marry me. I had that contract with her grandparents. I could enforce it and she'd be mine. Why hadn't I used it? The only answer I could come up with was that I had turned into some sappy, pathetic loser who wanted to do right by her.

I wanted her to *choose* me. Fuck!

My memory was still fucked up from that night three months ago. Whatever it was, it had to be bad, judging from Autumn's reaction. I'd been digging and digging to find the information on who fucking slipped that drug into my drink.

I finally had a name. Two names. And both were in London.

Talk about karma.

TWO DAYS LATER, I was in a London cellar, examining the fucker and his woman. They were both strung up with cuffs, their arms spread into a V-position. I felt a bit creative so I pinned nails through their palms.

My ears didn't thank me because they screamed like little bitches. I could still hear the ringing in my ears. Good thing the basement of my London townhouse in the heart of Chelsea Barracks in central London was soundproof.

My eyes flicked to their feet that were stained with blood. I felt generous and left them dangling, just so they could feel that nail stretching that hole in their palms. Although I did break their kneecaps beforehand.

After all, I couldn't be too generous.

"Should have gone on a diet," I told them both, following up with a click of my tongue.

I was extra agitated, counting down the hours until Autumn's arrival. Four more hours.

My eyes roamed over their bodies, mottled with black and blue bruises. I was never fond of torturing a woman. In fact, I'd never tortured one before. But there was a first time for everything.

She cost *me* everything.

"Okay, let's try this again," I started, snapping on a pair of gloves and then finding my way to the table with tools.

Knives. Screwdrivers. Brass knuckles. Nail gun.

You name it, I had it.

Ricardo was with me, his arms folded over his chest and a bored expression on his face. He wanted to start the torture session hours ago. I wanted them to think about it for a bit. Psychological torture was so much worse when left to fester in someone's mind.

"I'd pick a nail gun," Ricardo muttered. "Give him a piercing. Or two."

I grinned. Ricardo could be sadistic when he wanted to be.

"Let's use it for every wrong answer," I told him. "I want to make you happy. I know you're itching to use that nail gun."

"Man, you are the best boss." Ricardo grabbed the nail gun and ensured it contained nails while I selected a knife. It was easier to cut up a person with a knife than a nail gun.

I faced the beaten fucker and smiled.

"Let's get started, shall we?" I didn't wait for him to answer and pressed the tip of the knife into his neck. "Your name and who sent you?"

"Fuck you," he spat.

I glanced at Ricardo. "Want to use the nail gun and then I cut him?" I feigned a thoughtful expression. "Or you can shove that nail gun into the bitch and he can watch?"

Ricardo shrugged. "Or you cut her open and he watches? If he doesn't answer, then I patch her up with a nail gun."

Ricardo and I grinned viciously. This was the shit that happened when people crossed you.

"A sound plan." I pressed the tip of the knife to her sternum, my eyes on her as she shook with fear. She kept glancing at the man, hoping he'd save her.

"Did I give you permission to touch me in Abu Dhabi?" I asked calmly. But it was all a disguise. On the inside, fury

burned and something dark rooted in my chest. "Tell me what happened and who's behind it?"

Her eyes widened but she kept shaking her head. She wasn't scared enough. Of me anyhow. So I pressed the blade harder against her skin and dragged the knife down her torso. She screamed as blood welled and trickled down her body.

And I felt nothing. Fucking nothing.

I was about to push the blade into her belly but her man screamed the answer. "It was your father," he yelled. "He wanted my wife to fuck you. He paid a million upfront and a million once the job was done. He wanted the girl out."

Something icy rooted in my lungs. Everyone in this room knew who *the girl* was. That fucker couldn't let a good thing flourish. He was destructive by nature. Everything he touched turned to ash.

"How far did it go?" I asked with the rage coiled tight in my chest. When they both remained silent, I roared. "How far did it go?"

"All the way."

Three little words.

It was just those three words that turned the bile in my throat into acid and I vomited all over her. The mere fact that she had her hands on me caused me to retch.

Ricardo put the nail gun to her gut and pulled the trigger. But the whole time my ears buzzed and I pictured Autumn seeing it all.

"What's your name?" I asked the man.

"E-Ernest Sizzling." His eyes flickered to the woman. "René."

The primal rage tore through my chest. The thought that Autumn saw it all. The thought that they could have hurt Autumn.

"Did she see?" I asked, my voice dull to my own ears.

"Yes."

"It's not my wife's fault," her husband attempted to defend. "If she hadn't done it, I'd have to do it to the girl. If we refused, he had others. They were worse."

That was when I lost it. Rage exploded, blinding me. The thought of him touching Autumn, snuffing out that light that always shone in her eyes.

The woman that loved to dance in the rain. The woman that kissed my scars. The woman that started healing me.

I rammed the sharp blade through the woman's belly, then punched him. I alternated slashing the blade through him, then her. Somehow the nail gun was in my hand and I alternated between stabbing them and shooting the nail gun. I punctured his chest, then hers and watched them choke on their own blood.

An agonized howl split the air.

Hers. His.

I had no fucking idea, but by the time I stopped, my chest heaved and their throats were slit, their heads hanging loosely to the side and I was covered in blood.

I stared at the massacre I'd committed.

"You didn't give me a turn." Ricardo's calm voice had me turning to face him. There was no pity in his voice. Just a mild curiosity.

"She's the first woman I ever killed," I muttered. I'd be meeting the first woman I loved in mere hours.

A strange kind of calm washed over me. The contrast to the lunacy and rage I experienced mere minutes ago was jarring.

He'd never let me have her. If I explained to her, assuming she'd believe me, and kept her with me, we could run. But my father would hunt us. He'd never give up, until one of us was dead.

I would die for her. Take a bullet for her. But I couldn't handle Autumn coming to harm. That was something I could never forgive myself for.

I watched the guts hanging out of the two people I just slaughtered, and I knew.

I just fucking knew.

There was no chance in hell I could ever keep Autumn with me. Even knowing she was my one shot at any semblance of happiness.

I had to let her go.

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CHAPTER 20

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AUTUMN



I stared at my reflection in the mirror.

I wore a sweater dress that hid my little bump. The tiny life that we created somewhere in Asia; maybe it was in Kyoto. I'd like that. It was where I felt the happiest when I danced with him under the rainy sky, both of us laughing.

Alessio had swept me off my feet. Scrambled my mind. Made me lose all my senses. I left Canada without getting the depo shot. And without pills. Jesus Christ. I've had months of sex with Alessio without a single thought about protection.

That was what happened when you lost your mind. Yet, I couldn't quite find it in me to regret it.

Even after all of these weeks, months, my body trembled every time I thought about him. The emptiness since I walked out lingered in my chest and on my skin. I missed him so much that each heartbeat fucking hurt. My heart ached for something we could have had, but now never would.

There were so many days and nights I wanted to call him. This love for him grew too big for my chest, ready to explode. To beg him to love me. I wanted to be enough for him, just as he was for me.

Thankfully, my pride held steady. I was better than this. I'd survive it. One day the memories would no longer bring pain. *One day.*

My brown eyes stared back at me. I hated the color. I hated that it betrayed how I felt. I wanted to hide my pain from the world. Especially from Alessio. He filled my cracks so perfectly, only to use a sledgehammer and cause irreparable damage.

A tear ran down my cheek and I wiped it with a frustrated sigh.

Tears didn't help. It'd only make me look more pathetic. My hand drifted over my lower belly and my chest fluttered. A baby. Our baby.

My eyes roamed over my body. It was the same but then it wasn't. Would Alessio notice it? My stomach twisted into a knot. My chest tightened. God, I hadn't even seen him yet and I was falling apart.

Maybe I should change?

I went through five outfits. It started with jeans but they accented my baby bump. I was three months along. It was peculiar how a little pink plus sign could change so much.

I cried. Then I cried some more. I had never cried so much in my life.

My chest never stopped aching. The happiness turned into bitterness. And then I cried again.

But I knew I couldn't keep this secret from Alessio. He deserved to know. He *should* know. Before I could change my stupid clothes again, I left the hotel room with the determination I didn't feel.

Each step I took in the direction of his address felt heavier than the last.

I dreaded seeing him. The pain was still raw. Fresh. The weeks went on and I hoped it would ease. It didn't. The pregnancy had made me even more emotional. Rain made me cry. Sun made me cry. Seeing ripped up jeans made me cry. Everything made me fucking cry.

Before I knew it, I stood at the doorstep of the address Alessio gave me. It was only ten minutes from my hotel. I wished it was farther. I wished it was closer.

It had to be another symptom of the pregnancy and hormones. Indecisiveness.

God, we were doomed from the start.

I was just too naive to hope. To want what my parents had. To dream with him.

I inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled, forming tiny white puffs in the air. I pulled my coat tighter around me and took the first step up to the fancy townhouse in central London. February in London wasn't such a joyous occasion. The cold and the gloomy weather reflected my mood.

Before I had a chance to ring the bell, the door opened.

My eyes lifted to find Alessio's guy, Ricardo, standing in front of me. Frowning. A dark expression on his face.

He never said much when I saw him. More often than not, he'd accompany Alessio on his trips. Bodyguard or something. Thankfully, he never came along for our dates.

"Umm, hey," I muttered. "I-is Alessio here?"

Ricardo's expression was guarded but something about the darkness in his eyes unnerved me. He tilted his chin up the stairs. "In the bedroom."

I blinked, then flickered a hesitant look up the stairs. "In the bedroom?" I repeated slowly, my body suddenly warm. The damn, traitorous, single-track minded body.

Ricardo muttered something under his breath. My eyes darted back to him, but the only word that followed was, "Yes."

I wanted to ask him if Alessio has been happy these past few months. If he missed me at all. But my level of pathetic hadn't reached that level yet. Thankfully, Ricardo moved around me and left before my resolve weakened.

"Oh- okay," I muttered to his retreating back.

I entered the large, luxurious foyer. Marble shone. The chandelier gleamed. Paintings worth millions hung on the

walls. But I couldn't focus on any of it. The door closed behind me with a soft click when I reached the second step.

Glancing over my shoulder, knowing Ricardo wasn't there anymore. The man moved quickly and quietly. I returned the attention to the front of me. I took another step, and another. Until I found myself at the top of the staircase. A cracked door.

I ignored the ache blooming in my chest with the memory of the last time I peeked through a cracked door. I had to do this. For the baby.

Exhaling heavily, I strode towards the door with a certainty I didn't feel.

Knock. Knock.

I held my breath as I waited. "Come in."

God, that voice. My pulse drummed in my ears. My heart tripped up in anticipation. My thoughts became an indiscernible white noise as I pushed the door open and I came face-to-face with him.

My demon. My savage. My gentleman.

He sat at the little desk, and the moment his eyes met mine, I forgot to breathe for a few seconds. The darkness in his sober expression consumed me. Burned.

Eyes of melted steel looked back at me.

My skin lit like a live wire and my heart filled with a desperate hum. It clawed its way through my chest so it'd go back to him. His sins no longer registered. His betrayal was forgotten for a fraction of a moment. I wanted to run to him and throw myself into his arms. Like I had done every time he came to see me in a different town, country.

Except for Abu Dhabi.

My heart cracked another inch. My feet remained still.

He stood up, then ran a hand down his tie, watching me with that gaze that could light me up or destroy me. He held such power over me. Did he know it?

Something deep flickered through his eyes but it was replaced by a cold steel gaze. A mask.

I love you, I wanted to scream. You hurt me, I wanted to yell. You promised not to break my heart.

None of those words came out. Instead, I stood still as my heart thundered and the hole in my chest grew bigger and bigger. There'd be no patch big enough to bandage that wound.

"Autumn." He headed to the little minibar. His movements were smooth and sure as he filled his glass. "Want something to drink?"

"No," I rasped as my heart started cracking all over again. I didn't know what I expected. Maybe an apology. Maybe some regret. *Something*. But not this awkward silence and a cold shoulder. "No, thank you."

"Always so fucking proper," he muttered. "Except when you shoved that hotel tab on me."

He downed his drink, then poured himself another.

Was he drinking because he missed me? It was a dumb thought. The hope that flickered in my chest at that possibility was even dumber.

"You can afford it," I mumbled under my breath.

"And how would you know?"

"A wild guess," I retorted dryly, watching his broad shoulders and tense back.

He didn't bother looking my way and he barely spared me a glance as he passed me on his way back to his chair, the scent of sandalwood and spice lingering in the air. My lungs tightened with every breath as I watched him unbutton his jacket and sat back down.

His eyes returned to me. Unreadable.

It was then that I heard it. A toilet flushing. Running water. My tongue swept over my bottom lip and I looked in the direction of the noise. It had to be the bathroom.

"Why are you here?" Alessio's cold voice pulled my attention back to him.

"I-I have something to say to you," I murmured.

His gray eyes locked on me. I used to think of them as molten silver. But now, they were stone-cold gray. My chest heaved as my heart twisted.

"I don't want to hear whatever you have to say," he replied coldly.

A knife in the heart must hurt less than this. I was scared. I wanted him in my life for this baby. Our baby deserved the best. Yet at this moment, I wasn't so sure what the best was.

"We dated for two months," I croaked. "The least you could give me is two minutes."

"We didn't date," he replied in a tone so cold, it sent frost down to my bone marrow. "It was fucking. I fucked you. Despite my better judgement, I couldn't resist a good fuck. That's all this ever was."

Pain, raw and consuming, grabbed me by my throat. I should have turned around, right there and then. I should have slapped him and went on my way. I didn't. Desperation and hope robbed me of my pride.

"It's important," I choked on a hiccup. "W-what I have to tell you... it's important."

We stared at each other. His face was still the same, handsome and mesmerizing, but that lethal ruthlessness lingered in his gaze. Suddenly, I no longer felt warm. Something deep in his eyes froze my soul and my heart.

"Tell someone who fucking cares."

Another crack in my heart. Except this one split it in two.

Icy tone. Hard stare. Simple words. Yet they struck deep. They slashed me. Broke me. My knees shook and I feared they wouldn't hold me. This scenario I hadn't anticipated. This hole in my chest expanded until I feared it would swallow me and I'd drown in this pain.

"Was any of it real?" I croaked, my throat burning.

His jaw tightened.

The door to the bathroom opened and I got my answer. A woman came out. Skimpy little nightgown. Long blond hair. Messy. The kind you got after you were thoroughly fucked.

My heart turned to ashes. Like it had been torn out of my chest and sliced with a blade.

None of it was real. It was just a fuck for him. I didn't need this. I wanted more. I could have more.

Except, I wanted him. I loved him.

"Goodbye, Alessandro."

I turned around and forced one foot in front of the other. I left without a backward glance. I didn't run.

It wasn't until I was outside and saw my mother that a sob tore through me. A tear ran down my cheek. Then another. Until my face was wet, the cold temperatures stinging my face. My legs gave out. Before my knees hit the cold ground, Maman caught me.

Sobs wracked my body. My heart twisted in my chest and all the while my gasping sobs filled the cocoon of Maman's arms.

And the whole time she held me, whispering words only a mother could. "Want me to kill him?"

And then I cried harder, because Alessio dead would be the ultimate hell on this earth. I fell in love with a bad man. He promised me heaven and delivered hell.

Life without him was hell and it had just started.

"Don't kill him, Maman," I whimpered. It should surprise me that she knew but somehow it didn't. "Where is dad?"

"Just me," she murmured into my hair.

My heart bled, matching the flood of tears. The man I fell in love with didn't exist. Molten silver turned into a cold metal.

"It's okay, ma chérie." Maman's mouth moved against my hair. "You let it all out."

"H-he doesn't love me, Maman," I croaked. It was stupid. I was a grown-ass woman and I cried like a baby. My chest hurt so fucking bad, I thought I'd die.

"He doesn't deserve you." Her voice was hard. Cold. I lifted my head off her chest and faced her. And for the first time I got a glimpse of the woman she was before she found my father. She cupped my cheeks and pressed a kiss on my nose. "He's not good enough for you, ma petite."

"I'm pregnant," I whispered.

She didn't seem surprised. "Want to talk about what happened?" I shook my head. "Bien. When you want to talk, you'll tell us. For now, I'll take care of my baby. And dad, you, and I will take care of your baby."

I buried my face into her chest and my heart shattered. This raw ache in my chest was unbearable. Nausea rolled in my stomach. My heart clenched so hard, I was certain it would stop beating.

It wasn't until now that the loss of him fully sank into my bones.

Alessio broke my heart, and I couldn't find the strength to fuck him up.

CHAPTER 21

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AUTUMN

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FOUR YEARS LATER



New York City.

The world through my lens. My own exhibition of photographs I'd taken for the past four years.

It was nerve-racking, exciting, surreal and totally exhilarating.

Years of snapshots - unforgettable moments, breathtaking corners of this Earth, children in war torn countries, families in starving countries, the world nobody wanted to talk about. A starving child offering his bread to another who had nothing. A human sharing his coat with a child. They were the moments that offered hope for our world.

Raw emotions were reflected on each photo. Or maybe it was just me because I remembered every single thing I felt when I snapped the photos.

Awed at the beauty of this planet. Sadness. Happiness. Awareness.

I was proud of every single photograph. That was how I saw the world. A reflection of my emotions.

Broken heart. Healing. Surviving.

Standing in the corner of the gallery, I leaned against the wall and watched people studying every piece. Soft whispers. Critical eyes. More examinations.

My eyes roamed over the large gallery. Never in a million years had I dreamt that I'd have my own exhibition in New York City. This was the closest I dared to venture. I had avoided Canada for the past four years. Even New York was too close to Montréal, but I couldn't pass up this opportunity.

I knew there was still a lot to learn, but I was so fucking proud of what I'd accomplished. Nobody could take this away from me. I lived every single moment in these photographs.

"We are so proud of you." Maman and Dad came beside me. My mother looked as beautiful as ever in her long red dress. Dad couldn't seem to keep his eyes away from her long enough to study my photographs.

It made me smile. It made me happy. Even after all their years together, they loved each other. It gave me hope despite the ache that still lingered in my chest. Even after all these years.

"Thanks, Maman." She pressed a kiss on my cheek. "And thank you for coming all the way to New York to watch Kol."

My greatest treasure. My son.

"Of course," Dad answered, his eyes twinkling. "It's our job to care for our daughter and grandson."

My family. I wouldn't have survived without them.

"How do you feel about your exhibit?" Maman asked. "I think every photograph is magnificent. And to think you've been in some of those areas! Just the thought of it frightens me."

My parents have been amazing over the last years. Whenever I had to go to remote locations or potentially dangerous ones, they'd meet me anywhere in the world, take Kol and care for him until I was back.

I hadn't been back to Montréal once. Kol had yet to step foot in Canada. He had visited almost every continent but

hadn't stepped foot there. It was better to be safe than sorry. Especially considering the threat.

My parents never pushed to know what happened. Dad hadn't demanded to know who the father was. Sometimes I wondered if he suspected. Worried gazes when he talked about the Russos. Like he said too much. Or maybe not enough.

"I hope people like it," I admitted. "But if they don't, that's fine too. I enjoyed taking every single one of those photos."

It was true. Photography was something that I did for me. It made me happy. Sometimes it felt like I saw a whole new world through a lens. A richer, more detailed world.

"I eavesdropped on some of the visitors," Father said conspicuously. "I have yet to hear a negative comment. Although if they dare to say it, I'll break their necks."

Maman threw her head back and laughed, then patted him on the hand. It was hard to imagine my father as a killer. Though he had to have killed someone during his career. Not that he'd tell me.

"Come on, killer," Mom murmured, her voice doting. "Let's go take our grandson from Branka's hands so she can enjoy some of her evening too."

With another peck on my cheek by both of them, they left me, while I watched after them wistfully.

That was all I wanted. To grow old with someone who would look at me the way my father looked at my mother. But I had come to the realization that what my parents had was as rare as red diamonds.

A dull pain was still a hollow presence in my chest. Just as Maman promised, it got better, but it never healed. Alessio was a constant whisper in my soul.

Laughter rippled through the gallery and my gaze traveled to it. Unsurprisingly, it was the crew from *National Geographic* that took me under their wing four years ago.

They insisted on coming in to show their support. They were the most amazing group I had ever met.

Much like me, they didn't bother dressing up. When you spend months on the road, you end up preferring comfort to fancy. I opted for jeans, emerald flats and a green crew neck blouse. It fit the whole summer vibe in New York City.

The four crew members made it over to me.

"How is our star?" Loren exclaimed, and I couldn't resist rolling my eyes. "What? You are a star. None of us had a gallery exhibition before. And we've been around about three decades more than you."

"Two decades might be pushing it," I retorted, smiling. "You guys are not that much older than me."

"Pfft. You're a baby," Loren remarked.

"I tried to buy one of your photos, but I was told it's all sold out," Alex complained and my eyes snapped to him in shock.

"What?"

The whole thing just started. I certainly hoped my parents didn't get a bright idea and buy the entire exhibition. They'd be bankrupt. We'd be bankrupt.

"Yeah," Sarah chimed in. "How in the hell did we miss out? I barely blinked and poof, the whole thing is sold out."

An awareness trickled down my neck and I turned my head. For a moment, I froze. I recognized that face.

Cassio King.

Peeling my eyes from him, I glanced frantically around, searching for the gray eyes that haunted all my dreams.

Nothing.

Excusing myself from the group, I walked over to the mobster. Jesus Christ. I should be running the opposite way, not towards Cassio King. It was only once I was two feet away that I spotted a woman on his arm, and another couple next to him.

A double date. How sweet.

My eyes traveled over the four of them. It would seem Cassio and his friend preferred redheads.

The red-haired woman on Cassio's arm had ocean blue eyes. But the other one had the most unusual eyes I had ever seen. Unless the lighting was throwing me off, they were violet. I had never seen anything like that.

"What are you doing here?" I blurted out, returning my eyes to Cassio and glaring at him. Yeah, I wouldn't win the award for hospitality.

"Hello, Autumn," Cassio greeted me, unfazed by my rudeness. "Nice to see you again."

"I can't say the same," I grumbled, then immediately scolded myself. That was beyond rude. And still, no apology came out of my mouth. "So what are you doing here?"

Brave or stupid. It was still up for debate.

"I own the space," Cassio answered.

"Oh." Seriously? Of all the buildings in New York City, my exhibition ended up in the one belonging to Cassio King! The freaking mobster. "Sorry," I mumbled my apology. "I didn't mean that I'm not happy to see you."

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

The woman on Cassio's arm chuckled softly. "Yes, you did." My cheeks burned. Possibly melted. "Don't worry about it. It happens more often than you know." My eyebrow cocked. *Interesting*.

"Nice exhibition." The other woman complimented.

My eyes glanced around the walls. "Thank you." Then realizing, I had no idea who she was, I extended my hand. "I'm Autumn." Then did the same with the other woman.

"Autumn, this is my wife, Áine. And my friend, Luciano Vitale and his wife, Grace," Cassio introduced us and we shook hands. I couldn't quite decide who's scarier. Cassio or Luciano. Not that it was a competition.

I returned my gaze to Grace and Áine. They were a safer alternative, and for the moment, we studied each other curiously. They both seemed so clean cut for someone as

tatted up as their husbands. But then Alessio was hiding a lot of ink too. Heat rose on my face at the memories, but with it always came bitterness too. That latter part was what I hated.

"I heard your entire exhibit sold out," Grace remarked, her violet eyes on me. "Congratulations. That is the fastest two million earned I have ever seen."

My mouth parted with shock. I hadn't thought through what a sold out exhibition meant for me. Two million.

"Did you buy it all?" I asked Cassio.

He shook his head. "No, Áine got one."

"Which one?" I questioned absentmindedly. Awareness trickled down my neck. My eyes shifted to the left, then right, behind me. There were people all around us but everyone's eyes were focused on the photographs. Not on us.

There was a single mirror on the far wall and even that reflection confirmed nobody paid attention to us.

I returned my attention to the four of them.

"The piece you called *Woman with broken eyes*," Áine answered.

That was one of my favorite pieces. And one of the more heart-wrenching ones. The emotions from the woman reflected so vividly in her eyes - torture, pain, horror but also the strength. She prevailed. The man who dared to shame her, rip her apart because she dared to love out of wedlock didn't win that one.

My throat choked. "That's one of my favorites," I admitted in a raspy voice.

"I paid extra," Áine admitted. "I had to out buy this prick who thought he should get all your photos."

I had no idea who that prick was. If it was Alessio, I didn't think Cassio would allow her to call him a prick.

"Thank you," I said. I meant it too. "Every penny you paid for that photo will go back to the woman and the shelter she started."

“What a coincidence,” Grace remarked. “Áine has a whole thing with rescuing women and placing them in shelters.”

It wasn't something I expected to hear.

“Hmmm. Small world, huh?”

These two women seemed to have a purpose.

Some days I felt like I had a purpose. Other days, my purpose seemed to drift because it always came back to him. Without Alessio, I only drifted through life.

Microphone feedback rippled through the air and the three of us turned in its direction. Everybody's steps paused and the crowd quieted.

What the hell was Branka doing up there?

She stood up on the stage, dressed up in a flowy pink dress, her hair gleaming red, golden and brown colors beneath the lights. Our eyes met and she grinned with that mischievous look I have come to know so well. Her eyes reminded me so much of her brother that it fucking hurt sometimes.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I just wanted to take a moment and announce that everything has sold out.” A murmur of disappointment traveled through the room. “But- “ Branka paused for the effect or something, smiling at everyone like a perfect hostess. “But if you are interested in more prints, please feel free to check out our website or our social posts.”

She grinned, her eyes traveling over the room. While I loved to blend in the shadows. Branka loved to shine. However our personalities meshed well together. When I took charge in the field, she supported me. When it was time to sell ourselves and our brand, she took charge and I supported her.

“I hope you follow Autumn to her next exhibit. We'll announce it well in advance on our website.”

With that, she gracefully descended the stage and nodded at a man standing in the corner. Together they

made their way towards us.

"Who's that?" Grace asked curiously.

"No idea."

I flickered a glance at Branka's date. At least I thought it was her date. Slim. Tall. Totally not her type.

"Hey there," she greeted me smiling. "Guess who I have here?"

She glanced to the right of her and we all followed her gaze. I cocked my eyebrow and followed her gaze to her date. She acted like I knew him. I didn't recall meeting him before.

"Hmmm, your date?" I guessed.

She shook her head. "No, this is Jaymes Young." I blinked, then blinked again. "Autumn, *this* is Jaymes Young."

"Oh my gosh," I muttered, my eyes darting between Branka and him. Then in an attempt to get myself together, I extended my hand to shake his. "It's so nice to meet you." Then a small giggle escaped. I felt like a teenager. "I can't believe I'm actually shaking hands with you."

"Right back at you," he retorted, smiling. "Branka cornered me on my way in and insisted I should talk to you about a few photos that I was interested in."

My hand came to my cheek. "Yes, yes. Of course. Anything you like."

An awareness tickled in the back of my head and I turned around, but there was nobody behind me.

Branka chuckled and I returned my gaze to her.

"Well, not anything he likes." I frowned at her. "Certain prints you said you'll never sell. So..." she justified. She pursed her lips. "That means he can't have anything he likes. He can't have you."

I frowned. Branka behaved like I wanted to date this guy. She usually wasn't such a smartass when it came to men. Nor a cockblocker. Not that I wanted this guy. Alessio ruined me for anyone else. I kept comparing every man to

him - too short, too tall, too blond, too much hair, not enough hair, too happy, not happy enough.

I've used every damn excuse in the book by now.

So no, I wasn't interested in this guy. Beyond fanning like a schoolgirl meeting her idol.

"I love your songs," I murmured.

"And I love your photos.

"Who's Jaymes Young?" Áine whispered loud enough for everyone to hear. I threw her a side-glance and caught Grace shrugging her one shoulder. Her expression clearly indicated she had no clue who that was.

"There are a few particular photos I was interested in," Jaymes explained.

"Of course. I have a few things on my phone I can show you too," I blurted out. "Just raw photos of some of the stuff I'm still working on. They are stored on my secure drive."

He nodded and I flicked a glance to Cassio and his guests. "Excuse me." I turned my attention to Branka. "Want to come along?"

She just shook her head. "You go on."

The two of us made our way to the corner of the exhibit with the window looking out to the street.

The room seemed to be oblivious to who stood next to me. Truthfully, I wouldn't have recognized him either. There were so many nights Branka and I spent playing rusty pianos and singing in off-the-beaten-paths of this world. When the only entertainment we had was us.

"Branka tells me you're a talented singer," Jaymes remarked and it took all I had not to start fanning myself.

"Not really," I admitted. "My mom is so much better. She loves it. I just love the memories that come along with it."

"You seem close to your family," he commented.

"I am."

Now more than ever, I thought silently. It was Branka who always silently reminded me that I was a lucky girl to have my parents. The two of us have learned to take what

we need from each other. Her relationship with her mother was bittersweet. *Tragic*, she called it.

She couldn't be close to someone who wouldn't protect her when she couldn't protect herself. From what little Branka has said, her siblings never got what they needed from their parents. She said it damaged Alessio, although she didn't elaborate.

Her brother.

Alessio never left my fucking heart, no matter how hard I tried to push him out. At this point, he was a reluctant tenant. Part of my every breath and every heartbeat.

My thoughts seemed to often drift away when it came to Alessio. Grief. The cracking of my heart.

"And you?" I attempted to change the subjects, glancing around. Why did I have a feeling like someone was watching me? A lot of people roamed around, but nobody paid attention to us. "Do you collect photos?"

"Only a few," he admitted. "I liked your non-conventional style. You capture feelings with your photos. I like that."

A group of people wandered near us, laughing and drinking. "Want to show me which ones you're interested in? And I can show you a few more that I haven't published yet."

He grinned. "I love the idea of having something nobody else has seen."

"I'd love a secret album you have that nobody else has heard," I suggested hopefully. "Although fair warning, I wouldn't be able to resist sharing it with a few people."

"Next song I write, I'll have you listen to it first," he joked. Or not, I wasn't sure.

"Okay, let's get back to business," I told him. "So I'm not holding you up."

We went through a few photos. My thoughts drifted to Alessio. They always seemed to revolve around him. Even after four years.

“So these three,” Jaymes concluded. “They’ll fit great in my studio.”

My gaze drifted out the window, the street full of pedestrians when my heartbeat halted. A tall figure. Dark hair. Broad shoulders. Familiar profile.

I blinked. And he was gone.

“Yes, yes. Give your address to Branka,” I muttered, my steps already leading me out the door. “We’ll ship it.”

Then I rushed through the crowds and bolted out the front door and onto the warm summer night. The summer breeze swept my hair against my cheek. My eyes searched frantically. The glow of New York city lights. The sound of the city - cars honking, people talking, music playing. But it was all background noise.

He was gone.

“I saw him,” I whispered to myself. “Right?”

Four years was such a long time. Four years without him seemed like a lifetime.

A very lonely lifetime.

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CHAPTER 22

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ALESSIO



I watched as they lowered my father into the cold ground covered by November frost and felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. I heard sniffles, soft cries, and I knew for a fact they were all fake. My father was hated by most, if not all.

The only ones that didn't even bother with fake tears were Branka, myself, and my half-brother. And Autumn's parents. I was surprised to see them. Unless they were here for Branka, since Autumn couldn't make it.

Autumn.

My favorite season. The only woman I loved. And lost. Last time I saw her I made her eyes turn brown. I haven't seen her in four years. Not unless you counted my stalking activity.

There hadn't been a day that I hadn't thought about it. One thousand four hundred and sixty days. Not a single day had gone by without me thinking about her. Regretting those last words. She was never just a fuck, but I knew if I didn't end it, end us, my bastard father would have never stopped going after her.

So she became my past, while still lingering in my present. My future.

She had made a name for herself. Attempting to save the world, while I corrupted it at the same time. Her photos were sought after and sold for a lot of money. She didn't

just capture moments that *National Geographic* booked. She became a freelancer. She visited the corners of the world that other photographers hesitated to visit. The photos she snapped made the public aware of topics nobody talked about.

Mistreated girls in Afghanistan. Starvation in Ghana. Child abuse. Discrimination.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

She and Branka ended up starting a blog and that was their motto. It was fucking appropriate that my sister and the love of my life aimed to save the world, while I corrupted it distributing guns and drugs.

Yeah, no wonder our story ended the way it did. A tragedy. A total fuck-up.

Colorful leaves covered the grounds all around us, creating a beautiful setting but there was nothing serene about the current moment. The autumn breeze flowed through, lifting the leaves off the ground, creating a dance in the wind.

Whirling around Senator Ashford, like witches casting spells around a fire. I wished there'd be a death wish cast on that fucker too.

If I could get away with shooting my biological father right here and now, I would. It'd save me time. Two funerals at the same time. It'd make my fucking year. But that wouldn't fly with my half-brothers.

Branka's gaze kept flickering to Autumn's parents. She wanted to go to them. Honestly, I didn't give a fuck. We were a clusterfuck of a family, courtesy of the man we were burying.

The man I killed. I should have done it years ago. It would have saved us all a great deal of pain. The final push was learning he was about to trade my sister for a shipment of drugs.

All it took was a clean shot through Father's brain to end him. Courtesy of my half-brother, Royce Ashford. Byron

planned the logistics; Royce pulled the trigger. It was fucking amazing what brought people together.

Now, I owed him. Reluctantly. We were still not friends, and I didn't consider them family.

"Autumn." Branka's soft exclamation stilled me before I followed her gaze.

It was then that I saw her. She stood off to the side, her cheeks slightly flushed. She must have just arrived. I took a deep breath, almost expecting to smell that unique scent of her. Apples, cinnamon, and fresh fallen leaves. The need to inhale her scent crawled up my chest, but instead oxygen burned my lungs. Her fragrance never reached me.

Four fucking years. The sound of her moans and her soft body underneath me never stopped haunting me. *She* never stopped haunting me.

I watched the woman who looked the same but different. Strong. Soft. Beautiful. So fucking perfect.

Like moths attracted to the flame, men's gazes followed her. *Some things never change*, I thought bitterly. It made me want to dig out all their eyeballs and throw them into the dirt so they'd never see my woman again.

Since I couldn't shout at everyone to avert their eyes, I took my piss-poor mood out on my half-brother.

"Stop staring at my woman before I punch you in the face," I hissed under my breath.

Yes, my woman. Autumn was mine. If I had to wait another four years, I would because there was nobody else for me. The biggest threat to her was finally gone. Now, I wanted another chance. A way for us to go back to the way things were.

I flicked a bitter look to the bastard's casket. He deserved to die a long time ago.

It was he who cost me my woman. It was he who cost me my childhood, mother, and both my sisters' well-being. My only regret was that I hadn't killed the old man decades ago.

Returning my eyes back to the woman who'd finally come back, I let my gaze travel over her body. Her simple black dress hugged her curves and only reached down to above her knees. Each time the breeze swept through the gravesite, it gave a peek of her beautiful curves.

Fuck, if it'd only bring her scent over my way. I just needed one dose of her to carry me until I got her back. In my bed. In my home. In my life.

The priest's voice penetrated through my thoughts.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

I hope you burn in the eternal flames of hell, Father, I added silently as the fistful of dirt landed on Father's casket.

I watched Autumn's raven curls dance with the breeze, framing her pale face. Her hair length was shorter, but still long enough to wrap around my hand. It was one thing that I missed in all her postings. She was rarely in her pictures, and when she was, it was never just her. It made it hard to see her body, her face, and her eyes.

But now, I could see those hazel eyes.

Her eyes searched the crowd until she spotted her parents off to the side. I watched her like a predator as she glided through the graveyard to get to her parents. Their faces lit up the moment they saw their only child and Autumn wrapped them both into a hug, placing a kiss on their cheek.

Then she kneeled down and every inch of me froze. A little boy with jet-black hair held her hand. She whispered words to him. The little boy smiled, then hugged her parents too.

She had a kid?

Nico's surveillance of her never said anything about a kid. What. The. Actual. Fuck? When I got my hands on my friend, I'd choke the fucking life out of him.

"Your sister's best friend?" Byron mused. I was so enthralled at staring at Autumn, I didn't even realize

Branka had left us to go meet her friend. "Just a piece of advice, it's never good to fuck your sister's best friend."

I shot him a glare then returned to look at Autumn. Four years without her were too long. Living without her touch was torturous. And sleeping was a special kind of torment. My nightmares were replaced with dreams of her. It was a temporary relief, only to wake up to realize I no longer had her. It was like losing her all over again - every forsaken day. So I'd stay up so late and get so fucking tired so I wouldn't dream of her.

But Autumn Corbin always found her way into my dreams. Just as she had into my heart.

The two women hugged tightly, then Branka kneeled down to hug the little boy. The kid grinned widely and returned the hug. My sister never mentioned that Autumn had a kid. Not that I asked but for fuck's sake. Couldn't I depend on anyone?

It wasn't as if I asked my sister for Autumn's deepest, darkest secrets. But having a kid was public knowledge. She should have told me that. And fucking Nico should have included that in his background check that I demanded a few months ago.

Autumn's parents kissed Branka, hugging her tightly in comfort. I was sure they knew the death of our father wasn't a big deal. Not with this cruelty. His death was a blessing.

My sister murmured something to her friend and Autumn nodded then kneeled, whispering words to the little boy. I couldn't hear her words but the way her lips moved, I knew her words were spoken softly. Just the way she used to murmur soft words when I fucked her.

Autumn was pliable after an orgasm. It was my favorite time with her, when she'd whisper sweet words and trail her mouth over my neck while her fingers skimmed over my skin and over my scars. She was the only woman to offer that soft touch, and I took it greedily.

Whatever Autumn said had the little boy raising his eyes as he gazed around. His eyes met mine for a fraction of a second. Gray with specks of green in them.

In the back of my mind something nudged me. A voice whispered, but I pushed it away and I focused on the boy's face. He had his mother's hair and eyes with those green specks, but his facial structure was different. Must be his father's. I hated the lucky bastard already.

A kid wasn't something I'd foreseen.

I'd kill Nico for not mentioning the kid. What the fuck did I pay him for?

Autumn softly took her son's chin and brought the little boy's face back to herself. A soft smile lingered on her lips as she spoke again. Whatever she said brought a happy smile to the boy's face and he nodded eagerly. She leaned, kissing him on the cheek and he wrapped his chubby arms around her.

She straightened up to her full height and nodded at her parents. The boy reached out his hands to both of his grandparents and the three of them walked off, leaving Branka and Autumn behind.

People slowly started approaching me, offering their condolences but my focus remained on Autumn. Even after four long years, I craved her warmth, her softness, her taste. I stood still, not daring to move or risk losing my self-control.

She was finally back and I wasn't about to let her out of my sight. I was about to collect on a debt owed. She had a contract to fulfill.

Son or no son.

The bastard who posed a threat to her was six feet under. For good.

And I'd be damned if I let her go this time. She was mine now.

CHAPTER 23

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AUTUMN



This didn't work out exactly as I planned.

The goal was to get to my parents' house before the funeral and have them stay behind with Kol. But the best laid plans get fucked up. Our flight got delayed, and when I finally landed, it was either miss the funeral or have my parents meet me there.

Truthfully, I didn't give a shit about Branka's father or his funeral. But I wanted to be there for my best friend.

The moment I stepped out of the cab, I sensed Alessio's eyes on me. I forced myself not to look, focused on my son and tried to slow down my wild heartbeat. Four years ago, I swore I'd never see him again.

But the man kept visiting my dreams. And now I saw him in my son's face.

All I had to do was take a look at my son and realize that all the pain was worth it. It gave me the most beautiful human being in the world. My son. For that alone, I'd endure a hundred humiliations and a hundred heartbreaks.

It only made me stronger. And I could totally resist Alessio Russo. I was older and wiser now. I knew what he was and the pain that came along with him.

I watched my parents walk to their car with my son between them. I knew Kol would turn his head one more time to ensure I was still here. And he did, as soon as they

got to Grandpa's car. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. My chest warmed and I waved, smiling reassuringly. He was the spitting image of his father, minus that coal black hair and the little specks of green in his eyes.

But he was mine. All mine. Alessio missed his chance.

"He's something," Branka murmured softly.

Yes, he is. My best treasure.

One last wave as my dad drove away and I turned to Branka. "How are you holding up?"

She hugged me again, and I returned it. "Now that you're here, great. I missed you."

I tilted my head. "It's only been a week," I pointed out.

The moment her father was pronounced dead, by mysterious circumstances, Alessio sent her a text and she flew out while I finished the photoshoot. The latest assignment took us to Central Africa, and we'd been there for the past three months. The wildlife edition. We'd had tons of fun with it - both for *National Geographic* and our blog edition.

It had been a dream come true, although with little Kol getting older by the day, it was time to think about a more permanent location to raise my son. With the old Russo gone, Montréal was now a possibility. If only Alessio wasn't here.

"You should go back to your spot, Branka," I urged her softly. "I'll wait for you here."

"I don't want to," she complained. But she knew it was the right thing to do. "Come with me."

Now that would be the irony. To stand over the grave of the man that came after me and tried to kill my son. I wanted to dance over the fucker's grave, not keep a straight face.

"I'll wait for you here," I told her firmly, smiling encouragingly, then nudging her forward.

I watched Branka take her place with her brother. And just like a magnet, my eyes drifted to his face. No amount of preparation would ever be enough to get used to Alessio Russo.

Beautiful, yet hard. Ruthless. Lethal.

Tell someone who fucking cares. The last words he had spoken to me. The words that changed it all. I still heard them in the whispers of the wind. Sometimes in the heat of a blazing sun. The words left a permanent mark in my heart and my mind.

Maybe it was the best case scenario for our ending because all of the stories I'd read about him over the last four years painted him in dark colors. I didn't think they were exaggerating either. The criminal of Montréal who ran the underworld alongside Cassio and Luca King, Nico Morrelli, Raphael Santos, and other mobsters.

The only good trait - they were all against human trafficking.

The only problem around that man was my traitorous body that still reacted to the man who shredded my heart to pieces. A shiver ran down my spine. The man that set my sexual expectations so high, it was impossible for anyone to reach them. It left me to endure a dry spell for the past four years.

So many long and lonely nights.

My mind knew he was bad for me. He left me in hell after those words, but my body didn't care. It was addicted to Alessandro - his touch, his darkness and his mouth. If there was a cure to this damning attraction, I would take it. No questions asked.

Alessio's eyes shifted from the person he was speaking to and our gazes locked. His jaw tightened and his unreadable eyes bore into me. My stupid, silly heart stuttered in my chest.

He was so damn beautiful and raw, sending molten lava through my veins.

But he wasn't mine. He was never mine. Not really.

I was smarter now. I had my son to think about.

Months of tears and a broken heart had taught me not to dream of the impossible. Alessio was always out of my league. Honestly, I didn't want him in my league. It wasn't the kind of relationship I ever strived for.

The months when the pain became too much and the terrible sensation that I had lost something irreplaceable overwhelmed the reason. I'd listen to Kol's soft breathing. A small life that depended on me. He was my entire focus. My life.

This was the best case scenario for my son. *Our son*, my heart corrected.

No, Kol was all mine.

Branka, her brother, and another guy started walking towards me and I blinked. The ceremony finished. Most of the people had disbursed while I was lost in my thoughts.

As I watched Alessio stride towards me, taller and darker than I remembered him, I had to temper the need to flee. Instead I met them halfway.

"Hello, Autumn." Alessio's voice was still the same. Smooth. Deep. Pulling me into its amber depths. Another shiver ran down my spine.

"Alessio." My voice was barely a whisper. He seemed bigger, taller. "Sorry for your loss."

His expression darkened. His jaw clenched so tightly, the muscles in his neck stood out. His breathing grew harsher. He advanced a step towards me and I had to fight the urge to take one step backwards. He was too close. Electricity crackled between us as he held my gaze. For a fraction of a moment, a carnal lust glittered in his steely gaze.

My skin tingled in response. The familiar wanting and lust shot through my veins.

The last words he had spoken to me whispered in my mind. *Tell someone who fucking cares.*

It was all the reminder I needed.

"Is anyone going to introduce me?" An unfamiliar voice penetrated the silence.

I blinked. Alessio's entire expression reverted back to a mask. An expressionless mask. But his eyes remained on me and it looked like he wasn't about to introduce me.

"This is my best friend, Autumn." Branka ended up making introductions. "Autumn, this is Byron Ashford."

My eyebrows shot up. "Senator Ashford?" I asked, studying him. Expensive custom tailored suit. Dark hair. Piercing, blue eyes. Holy smokes, he was handsome. "I assumed you were older."

The guy chuckled. "That's my father."

He extended his hand and I accepted his handshake. It didn't surprise me that the Russo family had connections in politics. The corruption was deep in all levels of the government. Some of my ideals died, but others, I still fought for.

"Maybe you can point out to your father that his vote in the Middle East affairs means life and death for some people," I retorted dryly. "But then he seems more worried about campaigning and accepting bribes from criminals."

An awkward silence followed. Okay, so it was a bit tactless and not good timing. But on the other hand, I didn't think I'd probably run into the guy again.

Byron's full lips curved into a harsh smile. "Duly noted and I'll be sure to pass along the message. Or you can tell him yourself." It was hard to tell by the look on his face whether he was pissed off. "I admire your work very much."

My eyebrows shot up. Branka hadn't provided him with my full name. He must have read the suspicion on my face. "I saw a picture of you during your exhibit a few months ago," he explained. "The photographer who will save the world."

I couldn't quite decide whether he was mocking me or not. Regardless, my sixth sense warned me that this man was just as good at hiding his emotions and thoughts. My eyes flickered to Alessio, then back to Byron and my brows furrowed. Minus the eyes, the two men looked very much alike.

Similar face structure. Same nose. Same full mouth. Different eyes.

"Was that your son?" Byron's question was casual but an alert shot through me. I managed a terse nod. "He is a handsome little boy."

"Thanks."

Branka shifted on her feet, her hesitant gaze traveling between Byron, Alessio, and me. As if she expected a bomb to detonate. Not that I blamed her. The way Byron watched me hinted to him knowing all of my secrets. Well, one secret. The one that I'd protect at all costs. After London, I decided it would remain my secret.

Maybe I was just paranoid. Yes, probably paranoid.

"Byron, can you take Branka to my place?" Alessio demanded, his eyes never wavering from me.

Every time I was around this man, he ordered someone to drive Branka home.

"Branka and I can take a cab," I chimed in. "To my place."

"No."

I blinked. He did not!

Did he realize he had no say in either of our lives? We were both adults and have been living on our own for the past four years. Well, Branka got an infusion of her brother's cash but still. He couldn't boss her around like that.

"That's okay, Autumn," Branka chimed in, probably sensing the tension in the air. "Why don't you come to our place?" Her question sounded hopeful. I wanted to say no; I needed to say no. "Please, Autumn."

With a heavy sigh and knowing I was making a mistake, I replied. "Yeah, sure. For a little bit."

I took a step to follow them when Alessio's voice stopped me. "I'll take you."

My head snapped his way. "That's not necessary."

"Yes, it is."

My jaw clenched. "I will not ride with you, Alessandro," I gritted.

I realized my mistake at once. Nobody called Alessio by his full given name. Branka watched us, curiosity and amusement in her eyes. Sometimes she reminded me so much of her brother, it wasn't even funny.

"We have things to discuss," he claimed, his voice calm and collected.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to go discuss it with someone who fucking cared. But I didn't. Instead, I just glared at him. Pissed off at him for being so calm. Pissed off at myself for being so worked up within minutes of seeing him.

"I have a sports car so it's probably better that you ride with Alessio," Byron chimed in. Fucking traitor.

"That's settled then," Alessio concluded with a smirk.

"I'll see you there," Branka murmured, pecking me on the cheek.

Branka and Byron walked away, leaving me standing face-to-face and alone with Alessio.

Harder, harsher Alessandro.

One thing was clear. Staying away from Alessio for four years wasn't long enough. I hadn't forgotten him and I still missed him. Despite that I hadn't forgiven him. I couldn't. Not that he ever asked for forgiveness.

This invisible force, pulling me towards him would be the end of me. Even after all of this time, memories of the two of us were bittersweet.

We stood close enough that his unique spicy sandalwood scent invaded my senses.

For the past four years, I tried to forget his touch. His smell. His rough hands. His burning desire. The sweet nothings he'd whisper. But it was all a lie.

The man I fell in love with didn't exist.

He stood unmoving, like a stone statue. As if he was waiting for something. But his eyes burned with words that I understood only too well. Except, his gaze deceived me. I couldn't afford to fall into his trap again. The stakes were higher.

I went to take a step back, to put some distance between us. One moment there was space between us and the next, he thrust a rough hand into my hair and titled my head back. A soft gasp slipped through my lips and my eyes widened.

His other hand wrapped around my waist, pulling me flush against his body. Before I could utter a single word, his mouth descended on mine. He was just a breath away and my body buzzed with that familiar feeling. The parts of me that were dead for four years came back to life. Like drops of rain in the desert.

My mouth parted and his lips touched mine when reason slammed to the forefront of my mind. My palms came to his chest and I took a step back.

"No." Such a simple word, yet it held such power. Yes, I said it, but it didn't stop disappointment from washing over me.

The feral, possessive look in his eyes sent a shudder through me. I knew how he kissed. Hard. Rough. Savage.

"You want this, Autumn," he claimed with longing in his voice. Or maybe my mind was playing tricks on me. "I want it. Just let it happen."

His hand wrapped around my waist and he pulled me closer. My palms rested against the stone wall of his chest, but instead of pushing him away, my fingers clutched his suit jacket, gripping him tightly to me.

I hated myself for it. I hated him for it. My body loved it and so did my stupid heart. Despite the pain, it kept beating for him.

"You and me. We make sense," he rasped.

My mind screamed. My reason protested. But my body betrayed me, molding into him.

I shook my head. I needed to keep my head.

"No," I repeated, my voice firm despite my insides shaking with the need to have him. "I wanted you four years ago and I let it happen. We both know how that ended. You can't just restart something you've broken."

He broke us. He destroyed what we could have.

My heart beat hard and fast against my chest, threatening to break my rib cage and leap to him. It felt like it clawed at my insides to get to him.

I had always wanted him. He was my everything. Until he wasn't.

My demise. My happiness. My downfall.

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CHAPTER 24

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ALESSIO



Autumn was quiet as I drove, leaving that fucking graveyard behind me.

She had barely sat in my Bugatti and her autumn scent already filled the car. She smelled just the way I remembered. My cock hardened. It was all it took when it came to her. I wanted to stare at her. Fuck her. Have her in every single space of mine.

Some men wanted space and boundaries. I just wanted *her*.

My heart has been frozen for the past four years. It had turned into a frozen block of ice the moment her eyes turned brown because of me, because of what I purposely did to her in order to save her. I became her villain out of necessity but the years hadn't been enough to allow me to move on. I'll never be able to move on. Since that first taste of her, there was no going back for me. She had consumed me from the moment we'd crossed paths.

Her touch. It was all it took. Suddenly, I couldn't fathom life without her. In my world of violence, torture and pain, she was the proof that there was life outside the underworld. A happy life.

She offered so much more than just a warm body. I wasn't a saint but I was never fond of physical closeness. Nor touch. It was the reason I always fucked women from

behind. Seeing their faces was too personal. Ghosts, at least the ones I remembered, came back too quickly.

But with Autumn, I wanted to see that bliss on her face. I wanted her pleasure before my own. And I fucking wanted to give her all of my broken pieces. That was the bottom line, wasn't it? My father broke me before I even became a man but with her, I remembered none of it.

With her I felt alive. Whole.

Without her, only coldness resided in my chest. Without her, I was nothing. With her, I was everything.

I wanted every fucking piece of her. To be the reason for her smiles. To wipe her tears away. To own her loyalty.

I gave my head a small shake. I was so fucked.

Now talk about irony. She didn't want to be anywhere near me and I was obsessing over her. She had turned my world upside down the moment she pushed me out of her bedroom. I kept telling myself she was just a nuisance but then why couldn't I let it go. Not the first time I met her. And certainly not now.

Now that the bastard was dead.

She had shattered the walls that made up my life and then slowly put them back together during those two months. She made me whole. But then, poof. She was gone and my blood pressure had never been the same.

"So what have you been doing over the past four years?" Jesus Christ, did I really just make small talk?

She must have realized it too because she snickered.

"And what have you been doing, Alessandro?" She shot me a glare, but her eyes weren't brown. They were somewhere in between. "Or should I say who?" She almost growled.

"I've been busy." I was tempted to reply with something sarcastic but it wouldn't do me any good. Not with the bomb I'd be dropping on her before today was over. I needed her in a good mood.

"I can imagine," she sneered. "I know your kind of busy."

My lips tugged up at her jab. Autumn wasn't exactly a wildcat but she definitely wasn't a doormat.

"I remember when you were pliant and more amiable to our talks," I mused, unwilling to argue with her. "Or even better, how to get you to be a pliant doll while I sucked at your- "

"And I vaguely remember when you weren't a dick," she snapped, cutting me off. Though the flush in her cheeks didn't escape me.

She turned her back to me, the stubbornness evident in the way she clenched her jaw.

"I saw your exhibits," I changed subjects. Her head whipped my way, surprise coasting her eyes. Those stunning eyes that held so much power over me! All she had to do was look at me and I was falling to my knees. My heart beat only for her. Despite the pain and all the fucked up shit, it couldn't help beating because it was waiting for *her*.

She held such power over me and she didn't even fucking know it.

"Your photos are really good," I continued.

"Hmmm."

"What? You don't agree?" I challenged.

She rolled her eyes in that familiar way, except there was no mischievous playfulness curving her full lips.

"I'm surprised you like them, that's all," she retorted dryly.

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know." She feigned confusion, but her eyes flashed annoyingly at me. "Could it be because a lot of my photos deal with illegal guns, trafficking of women, and drugs? And we all know what an upstanding citizen you are."

"I haven't changed," I sneered, unwilling to let her know her words hit the intended target. "My business hasn't changed. It didn't bother you before." Her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned in displeasure. She hated the reminder of our past. So naturally, I continued to prompt more memories. "In fact, I remember you being quite thrilled with me before. Screaming my name at the top of a mount-"

"Jesus Christ, would you stop?" she hissed, the blush spreading down her neck and disappearing under her dress.

"I'm trying to make conversation, Autumn," I told her calmly. "I want to know how you've been. I want to know about your son." And his father, I thought with bitterness. "The world you've seen. I want to know everything I missed over the last four years."

"I have no idea why you'd care considering how we parted the last time I saw you," she gritted. She clutched her hands in her lap, her knuckles turning white. "I've seen plenty of the world. My son is none of your business and neither is whatever happened after you-"

She cut herself off. Her brows were drawn, her mouth tight and her breathing shallow. I was so fucking tempted to reach out and smooth a hand over her brow. I never wanted to see distress on her face. Unfortunately, it has been all I brought her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She'd never fully comprehend how sorry I was. How hard it was to give her up. I could have accepted risks to me, but never to her. My death was acceptable, hers was not.

She was the cure to all my pain.

Her eyes met mine. Brown. Goddamn it, I hated that color.

"Sorry about what?" she demanded to know in her soft voice. Even when pissed off, she spoke softly. Fuck, where

did I even begin?

Sorry that she didn't get someone better than me. Sorry that I hurt her. Sorry that I couldn't keep my father at bay so her life wasn't in danger. Sorry that I failed her.

But none of those words came out.

"Sorry is not enough, Alessio," she whispered, then turned back to look out the window, signaling our conversation was over.

She didn't know it would never be over. Not for the two of us. I was useless without her so I'd take her now. I'd take care of her and her son, whoever his father might be. Hate slithered through my veins at the thought that someone else touched her soft skin, heard her moans or felt her tight pussy. But I would never be like my step-father. I would never cause pain to a child who had no control over his parentage. I was a better man.

God, I hoped I was a better man than that bastard who raised me.

We pulled up to my home, sitting on acres of land and surrounded by protection. I had procured the place decades ago for my sister, to give her some semblance of safety. One day I hoped it'd be a happy place for her family, my family. Our family.

Autumn jumped out of the car and rushed up the marble stairs without a backward glance.

"By all means, let yourself in," I grumbled under my breath.

She couldn't hear me since she was already out of the car by the time I turned off the ignition. I took a moment to admire her curves. She was still slim but there was more softness to her. I guess it was the result of having a child.

Once I found out what fucker had dared to touch her, he'd be a dead man. I had already sent a note to Nico.

My phone beeped, signaling a text message, and I glanced at it.

"Ah, speak of the devil," I muttered, then dialed him up.

"Why in the fuck didn't your background check include her kid?" I demanded to know. There was no point in wasting time and beating around the bush.

"You said you wanted to know about her, not her family and her kid," Nico answered unperturbed.

"Why in the fuck wouldn't I want to know about the kid?" I roared. I could already picture Nico shrugging his shoulders and sipping his cognac or scotch. Whatever his choice of poison was.

"I want the father's name," I demanded, my teeth grinding. "Now."

Children's high-pitched voices belonging to girls and boys sounded in the background. "Girls, cut it out. You too, boys. Or there will be no movie today," Nico warned. He had two sets of twins. Honestly, not sure how in the fuck Nico kept his sanity. His house always buzzed with life and children's' cries, screams, and tantrums.

"You really want to know who the kid's father is?" Nico asked. He must have put his kids in check.

"I asked, didn't I?"

"Look in the mirror, Alessio." I blinked, my eyes actually flickering to the rearview mirror. "You're the kid's father."

My ears buzzed and the whole world shifted on its axis.

I was the father. And I had abandoned her. Fuck me.

I ENTERED my home to find Branka and Autumn pouring themselves a glass of my finest scotch. As if that wasn't bad enough, Branka poured another generous, overly large glass, and offered it to Byron.

"Here, this is for driving me," Branka told him dryly. "It was the most boring ride home."

"I bet my ride trumps yours," Autumn murmured absentmindedly. She looked tired. Her dark lashes swept

against her cheeks in a dark fan as she took a gulp of my scotch.

Branka followed up by downing her own glass. I don't think either one of them cared that it was almost two-hundred-year-old scotch the way they were gulping it. It was supposed to be savored. Byron at least sipped it. He must have not been in the mood for socializing because he disappeared into my office.

"Is it bad that I'm glad that man is dead?" Branka muttered.

Autumn placed her hand gently over my sisters. "Just forget about it. Probably best."

She had no fucking idea. That man had put so many lives through hell.

"It will be nice to stay put for a while," Branka beamed.

"For now." Autumn took another drink of the scotch.

"What do you mean for now?"

"I'll see how it goes," she watched the liquid in her glass. "I kind of like being in the field."

"But you can't keep doing that with Kol."

Autumn sighed deeply. Kol. My kid. Branka hadn't once mentioned her best friend having a baby. Did my baby sister know? Or was that something Autumn kept to herself? We kept sneaking behind Branka's back during those two months.

"I know," she muttered. "Maman already got me an appointment to register him for a few hours of daycare. She said it's good for socializing." Was it? I'd have to look it up. Jesus, I knew very little about kids. Would I have to learn how to change diapers? "God, I can't believe I'm back home. Maman kept my room exactly the way it was."

"Mine too?" Branka was shocked.

"Yes." Autumn pushed her hand through that thick mane of hers. "We should have come back earlier but-" she cut herself off. "Anyhow, so not sure how long this will last."

“What did Alessio want to talk to you about?” Branka asked her curiously.

She shrugged her slim shoulders. “My photos.”

The look on Branka’s face clearly showed she didn’t believe her. “Yeah, because every man wants to talk about arts and crafts.”

Autumn shot her an annoyed look. “Well, I guess your brother does. Maybe he has an artistic soul.”

Branka rolled her eyes. “Yeah, his arts and crafts end at making furniture and torturing- “ My sister would be the death of me. “Anyhow, he likes to make furniture. Although I don’t remember the last time I saw him do that.”

“He builds furniture with his own hands?” Autumn asked her, disbelief clear on her face. Branka nodded. “Geez, I didn’t know he’s that good with his hands.”

“You should test out his hands,” Branka muttered. “Unless you already have.”

“What the fuck are we talking about?” Autumn grumbled.

“My brother’s hands,” Branka answered innocently with that look on her face I have come to know so well. It had trouble written all over it. “And what is it with the two of you? I can’t quite decide whether you can’t stand each other or want to fu- “

“You better not say it,” Autumn hissed her warning. “I know we buried your father today, but if you say it, I swear I’m gonna lose my shit.”

Branka grinned. It was all the challenge she needed. “What? Feeling a bit horny? Your last date didn’t go so well.”

Her last date? Fury shot through me.

“Branka- “

“I just want to know what’s going on,” Branka grumbled. “There had to be more behind my brother insisting you ride with him.”

"Fine, he talked about my photographs and wanted to know what we've done for the past four years."

"Maybe he's fishing for information?" Branka pondered and my gut warned there was something my little sister was hiding. "What have you told him?"

"Nothing." Autumn sounded too defensive. "There was nothing to tell."

"Really?" Branka watched her critically. "Like absolutely nothing to tell?"

"Should I have told him all my dreams and desires?" Autumn retorted sarcastically.

This time Branka laughed. "Yeah, like that one dream you had in high school."

Autumn rolled her eyes. "You'll have to be a bit more specific. Those dreams changed weekly. Daily sometimes."

They both chuckled. "True," Branka agreed. "The one where you insisted you'd only marry a local guy because you wanted to stay close to your parents. And then that prick called you narrow-minded and I had to punch him for you."

I certainly hoped Branka was joking but by the way Autumn choked on her drink told me she wasn't. "He ran to his mommy crying." They both snickered. "The only reason nothing was said was because of who your brother was."

Branka shook her head. "No, they didn't call anyone because of who my father was. Alessio is scary but he always makes me do the right thing. My father was a different story."

Both of them remained quiet for a moment.

"Why don't you marry Alessio?" Branka suggested.

This time Autumn did choke on her drink. "Yeah, that would be a hard no."

There was no hesitation in Autumn's voice, but her flushed cheeks didn't escape me.

Branka chuckled. "Somehow I knew you'd say that."

They both poured themselves another drink, clinked glasses, and continued drinking.

"Yeah, he's not really your type," Branka remarked, though I detected sarcasm in her tone.

Wrong, sister. I was totally her type and she was mine.

"I guess."

Branka already refilled her glass. And her own. That bottle would be gone tonight, unless I locked it up.

"What do you mean, you guess?" Branka inquired as she put the bottle down, then took another sip.

Autumn chuckled. "C'mon, Branka. He is hot. Scary as shit, but hot nonetheless."

"Would you do him?"

"Branka!"

"What? It's a good question." Branka defended herself while Autumn's cheeks turned crimson.

"Something is definitely wrong with this conversation. If I had a brother, I would not want to know if you'd do him."

Branka shrugged her shoulders. "The fact that you are avoiding the question, tells me you would do him."

Autumn exhaled. "No, I wouldn't. And I wasn't avoiding the question. Merely pointing out how inappropriate it was."

"You should do him."

"See, that's why I don't tell you when men are hot," Autumn pointed out. "You go into full matchmaking mode. Honestly, that should be a business you start. You thrive in matching couples together."

Branka grinned and leaned her head back. "I know. So far I did pretty well. Thanks to me, two of our crew members got hitched."

"Yep."

"So Alessandro is your type?" Branka tried again.

"Jesus, you are killing me." Autumn spat out annoyed. "No, he's not my type. Currently, nobody is my type."

"Okay, okay. He's not your type." Branka refilled their drinks. "Bottom's up, sis."

They both laughed and drank it down, then poured themselves another one.

Leaving the two friends to their own devices, I went in search of my half-brother. Byron and I had come to a reluctant truce after he helped me get rid of the old man.

The office door shut behind me with a quiet click. I found Byron seated comfortably in the sitting area of my office, sipping the scotch.

I crossed the room, my steps slow and deliberate, until I reached my desk. I sat behind it, a muscle in my jaw pulsing. Decades of resentment were hard to overcome and truthfully, Byron did me a solid. I owed him for this favor, and I hated being indebted to anyone.

"She's pretty," Bryon commented nonchalantly. I didn't comment, but my teeth clenched. "Perfect wife material for an up and coming politician. And closer to my age than yours."

Anger burned in my chest. Byron was just two years younger than me, but he and Autumn were more compatible. On paper only. Both were clean cut. Both had ideals. But there was something about seeing Byron and Autumn together that made me want to smash my half-brother's head against the nearest wall. Byron, just like Autumn, wanted to save the world. It was the reason he worked behind his father's back - cleaning up the mess of corrupted dealings he had left in his wake.

"You realize you're growling, right?" Byron took a lazy sip of his drink. My fucking drink.

"And you're annoying me." Restlessness buzzed beneath my skin. I was eager to kick my plan into gear and now that I learned Kol was mine, I was obsessed with putting it in play. Jesus, he was mine. I had a kid. A smarter person would be furious she kept that hidden from me, but the obsessive and slightly psychotic side of me was thrilled

there was something tying us together. A bond that couldn't be broken.

That fucking last scene of us together four years ago played in my mind. Over and over again. Like a broken record. She reached out to see me, asking to talk to me, and I shut her down. Was she going to tell me about the baby when she came to see me? I never gave her the chance. Another thing to add to my list to be sorry about.

Would she forgive me?

Because letting go wasn't an option.

I should have been there for her. *I should have been there for her.*

I focused on the positive. Autumn did a good job hiding my son from my father. It made me love her even more, if that was even possible. She protected him from that old bastard for the last four years.

I couldn't wait to have her in my penthouse. In my bed. Because there was another organ that worked only for her. My dick refused to entertain the idea of any other woman. Just her.

Four years was a long time for abstinence and constant jerking off.

"You realize she's your weakness, right?" There was no need to ask who we were talking about. Autumn Corbin, soon to be Russo, was my weakness. And I couldn't even find the will to give two flying fucks. I'd keep her safe.

Her and our son.

She was the puzzle my heartbeats missed. That organ only functioned properly when she was around.

I forced thoughts of jet-black curls and hazel eyes aside for the moment. There was no need to broadcast my weakness.

"Mind your own goddamn business, Byron."

"And here I thought you'd love me and be nice to me forever for killing your father for you." Byron feigned hurt,

sarcasm heavy in his voice. "And you have that deal with gun dumping with my cousin, Dante."

"Yeah, I'd love for you to forever stay out of my sight," I grumbled, then my lips curved into a sardonic smile. "I bet you a specific woman is demanding you stay out of her sight too," I jabbed mildly.

Surprise coasted through his eyes, followed by annoyance and a hint of fury. "You didn't really think your oldest brother wouldn't know your secrets, huh? What kind of brother would I be?"

"It's the first fucking time you called me your brother, and you've done it twice in less than a second," he gritted.

I could see his anger pulsing in his jugular. It wasn't at me; it was at a different kind of woman. If Autumn was my weakness, that red-haired woman was his.

Byron, despite his clean cut appearance, was just as ruthless as I was. The last person who dared touch something of his, a woman to be exact, ended up in a coma with missing fingers and toes and a face that would never recover.

This must have ruined Byron's will for conversation because he stood up, buttoning his expensive Brioni suit. I fucking hated that we both liked those goddamn suits. Maybe I'd permanently change to jeans because Autumn did mention my ass was sexy in jeans. It'd make it harder for her to resist me.

Right? Fuck! I'd end up hitting an insecure stage in my forties. Lovely.

"Russo, I already have annoying brothers," Byron grumbled, his expression irritated. "I don't need another one."

We were halfway down the large foyer when we both paused, the sound of Branka's and Autumn's laughter reaching us from the terrace.

"I think I'm a lightweight," Branka announced, swaying on her feet and giggling drunkenly. "I used to be able to

drink a whole bottle and not feel this impact.”

“Well, alcohol was scarce in the jungles,” Autumn mused, her own tone slightly slurred.

I could see Autumn perfectly from here. Both she and Branka sat on the marble floor of the terrace, their heads tilted backwards against the rails. The moon’s silver rays shone against their faces. My sister seemed happier. But it was my woman that made me unable to look away.

Her ivory skin reflected perfectly in the dark. Her dark curls blended with the night, leaving her neck exposed. I craved to suck on her pulse, lick her skin so I could taste her... like I did four years ago.

She was so fucking beautiful, it hurt to look at her.

“We have to stop drinking,” Autumn said, her speech slower as if she was too tired to talk. Even with her speech slurred, her voice was still melodious. “If I get shitfaced, I might do something stupid. Like get your brother naked.” Then as if she realized what she said, she gave her head a small shake. “That would be very bad.”

I stilled at that admission. It took my sister a few heartbeats to realize what Autumn said.

“So you do have the hots for him,” Branka slurred, grinning stupidly.

As if Autumn realized her mistake, she tried to backtrack. She opened her eyes, glancing over at her best friend. “I don’t. Any man would do, really.”

“Which is the reason your dating life is so abundant,” Branka retorted. While I tried to distinguish whether my sister was sarcastic or not, she asked, “Do you still talk to Kol’s father?”

Autumn shrugged one slim shoulder, but didn’t answer her. So my little sister didn’t know that I was the father either. I’d like to think she would have told me. Branka was young but she was fiercely loyal, and when push came to shove, she’d choose family over friends. Soon, Autumn would be her family too.

“Maybe I should go and volunteer to be her man,” Byron mused next to me.

“Maybe I should just shoot you dead right now,” I said darkly.

Byron’s chuckle rang long after he was out the door.

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CHAPTER 25

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AUTUMN



It was a perfect time to confess my secret.

Yet, the words refused to leave my lips. I had never realized how true Maman's words were. The longer you withhold the truth, the harder it was to admit it.

And I have kept the truth from her for a very long time. Four years to be exact. The problem was that if I told her, I knew she'd tell her brother. Branka and Alessio were close. He was the big brother who protected her from their father who was obscenely cruel to their family.

The look she gave me set me on edge. "Why won't you talk about Kol's father?"

It wasn't the first time she asked this. Sometimes I wondered if she knew but wanted me to admit it. Although I'd think if she knew, she'd tell her brother. And I wouldn't be able to blame her if she ran to Alessio the moment she learned who Kol's father was. If I had a sibling, I'd tell him too.

"Because there's not much to say. We fucked. He didn't want anything more. Then he didn't even want that," I grumbled, then reached for my phone, sitting on the marble rail and checked the time. "Oh, crap," I mumbled, getting to my feet. The world was a bit dizzy. "Let's call it a night."

"Stay the night," Branka protested weakly.

“Or you could come back to my parents’ place?” I suggested.

This was my first time here. In Alessio’s home. Four years ago, we stayed at his penthouse downtown. Besides, the last thing I wanted was to stay under the same roof as Alessio Russo.

“I think I should stay with Alessio,” Branka murmured. “To ensure he’s alright.”

I nodded. It made sense. Although the man didn’t seem overly upset to bury his father today.

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to stay the night?” Branka tried one more time.

“I don’t want Kol to wake up without me there,” I said mildly. “I’ll ring a cab.”

I no longer had my car. It was old to begin with and I hadn’t been back since I first left. My parents met me in different cities across Europe to celebrate Christmas, to see Kol and spend time with us.

All because I refused to come back to Montréal and run into my first love. The father of my child. The man who betrayed me. But most of all, to never see Alessio’s father again.

“I’ll take you home.” The lazy drawl of the familiar deep voice sent shivers down my spine.

Slowly, as if I needed time to adjust, I turned around and craned my neck at his six foot five frame. Chiseled cheekbones and steel colored eyes. Sin and ruthlessness all wrapped up in an expensive coal black suit.

Even after all these years and knowing what he had done, my body still craved his touch. I had to wonder where my pride went. I felt like the moment I saw Alessio again, my feminism went out the fucking window.

Alessio’s eyes flickered to his sister. “Branka, you better go and sleep off my two-hundred-year-old scotch. I’ll take Autumn home.”

When she didn't move, he let out a sigh. "Don't leave," he ordered me. He took three powerful steps and reached Branka, then gently nudged her in the direction of the grand staircase that led to the bedrooms.

For a few moments, they both disappeared from my view, and I stood in the middle of the grand foyer, chandelier right above my head, pondering if I should remain or go. Truthfully, I didn't want to be alone with Alessio.

It was too risky - for my traitorous thighs not to open and welcome him in. Especially under the influence.

"No riding anything under the influence," I muttered under my breath. "Especially not Alessandro Russo."

"Too bad." The deep, smooth timbre of his voice sent a warm shiver down my spine. "I think we'd both enjoy that."

My fists tightened and I forced myself to loosen my fingers in tandem with my exhale. The things this man did to me.

Just as before, I slowly shifted, aware of his heat against my back. Meeting his gaze was always a shock to my system. It sent adrenaline rushing through my veins along with this constant craving that never eased.

Except when I was around him.

"Has your son never spent the night away from you?" His question came out of left field and for a moment, I stood confused, staring at him.

Your son, he said. *Our son*, my mind screamed. He was our son. I thought of him as our son. But for the second time this evening, I couldn't get the admission to leave my lips.

"He has," I said softly. "He's spent the night with Branka and my parents. That's it." My chest warmed, just as it always did when I thought about Kol. "Kol is quite demanding. Kind of like his father."

It was the closest to the truth I dared to go. Two heartbeats and Alessio nodded, understanding in his eyes.

"Let's go to my car," he finally said, putting his hand on the small of my back and guiding me out the door.

A car already waited for us. Different from his fancy sports car.

"What happened to the other car?" I asked him.

"There's more room in this car."

I wondered for what but I didn't bother asking him. It didn't really matter.

THE SECOND I sank into the expensive leather seats, the car door shut and Alessio came around the car. He slid into the driver's seat with that lethal grace that I used to swoon over.

Not anymore. Yeah, totally not anymore.

The car smelled like him. The spicy cologne and that woodsy smell that I came to associate with only Alessio Russo.

Without a word, Alessio shifted the car into drive and navigated through his lavish driveway, leading him off his property.

He drove steady and controlled. Just as he breathed, talked, and fucked. Yeah, the latter I didn't really need to remember. I took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled, then cursed myself for being so stupid as to let him drive me home.

That stupid scotch had more alcohol than I anticipated. It didn't help that I had two glasses of it. Or was it three? At one point, I started dumping the contents of my glass over the rail. Branka was past the stage of noticing.

The urge to touch him was so strong, I had to force myself to keep my hands planted in my lap. I watched his fingers curl around the steering wheel, and my memory

latched on to the images of the two of us the last time I felt them on me.

Cambodia. Right before Abu Dhabi.

"We're going where on that thing?" I asked Alessio, staring at the small motorbike.

"We're going to see the countryside of Cambodia. In all of its colorful glory," he answered. He behaved like a country trip through Cambodia was an everyday occurrence. "You said you needed a photo for your blog and you haven't been able to find it."

I planted my hands on my hips and leveled Alessio with a glare. "But what about sex? It's been a whole week."

His mouth twitched. "We'll have time for sex."

I watched him suspiciously. "Promise?"

"Cross my heart and all that." He roared the Honda to life and grinned wide. My gaze traveled over him. Plain black polo shirt. Jeans. God, he looked good in jeans. And combat boots. "Ready?"

He extended his hand and I laid my fingers into his palm. "I can never resist you in jeans," I muttered. "That's the only reason you wore them, isn't it?"

He didn't answer. "Do we need helmets?"

"I won't be going fast." His eyes roamed over me. I wore a pink t-shirt and jean shorts. Just like him, I opted for boots. Except mine were pink. "I'll never let anything happen to my woman."

My cheeks flushed. I loved when he called me his. "Do you want to see a temple or some dramatic landscapes?"

"Landscape," I answered. I always preferred the landscape. "I need my equipment though."

He patted the bag hanging off the motorbike. "Got it all here."

"Okay then," I sighed. "Here we go."

I hooked the leg over the bike and slid behind Alessio, wrapping my arms around his waist. We were in the

riverside town of Battambang and headed south. We reached the lush Cardamom Mountains at nightfall.

"Where are we going to sleep?" I asked him when he parked. My thighs were aching from spending so much time on the back of the bike and the rough terrain. I stretched my legs.

"There is a cabin up that hill."

Alessio grabbed the bag off the bike, took my hand and we hiked up the hill. The sounds of the night vibrated through the air. We followed the path, highlighted by the moonlight. My fingers interlocked with his.

It was just the two of us right now. Nobody else.

When we got to the top of the hill, I saw the cabin. Simple. Small. Perfect.

"Home, sweet home," I murmured.

He scooped me up and a soft squeal escaped me as I giggled giddily.

"What are you doing?" I questioned him as he kicked the door open with his foot, then stepped inside. "Aren't we going to enjoy the views?"

"Tomorrow, views," he rasped against my mouth. "Today you asked for sex, and I intend to deliver."

He placed me on a small, single bed made up with clean sheets that smelled like fresh mountain springs.

My insides clenched and my chest warmed when he stooped down on one knee to undo my boots. Once he slid them off my feet, he put them at the foot of the bed, then removed his own boots. The holster strapped around his ankle with a knife followed.

His eyes raked over my body. "Strip for me."

So I did. I always felt more daring with him because of the way he looked at me. With admiration. Like I was his salvation.

I pulled my t-shirt over my head. My breasts rose up and down, my eyes soaking in his expression. I wore a white lacy bra. He knew it was for him. He once said it was my

white bra and panties that had him losing his focus when we met. I could tell he remembered it by the way he drew in a breath. That familiar primal hunger in his gaze set me ablaze. He reached out his hand, and I handed him the shirt. He neatly placed it over the only chair in the cabin. My shorts followed. I shimmied out of them and handed them to him.

"Your bra and panties too," he demanded, his voice raspy.

"I want you naked too," I breathed. He pulled his shirt over his head. His jeans followed and he stood gloriously naked in front of me. The flicker of candles threw shadows all over him but not even darkness could hide his beauty.

I reached behind me and unlatched my bra. Then I tugged my panties down my thighs, giving him a glimpse of my folds. Glistening and wet.

My panties were barely off me when Alessio gripped my thighs and curled my legs around his waist.

"Ahhh," I moaned, feeling him at my hot entrance. I ground my sensitive clit along the ridges of his hard length. He watched the tip of his cock disappear inside me and we both groaned at the same time.

"I missed you," he rasped. My hands came around his neck, pulling him closer.

"I missed you more," I murmured against his lips. Then his mouth took mine, rough and wet. My breasts brushed against his chest. He impaled me in one harsh thrust and my nails dug into Alessio's muscular shoulders.

"Fuck." His mouth skimmed over my jaw, my neck. "You feel so good."

The walls of my pussy clenched around his cock, greedy for him to start moving. He roared as he started pumping in and out of me. Hard and deep. The pleasure coiled tight. Every relentless pound of him built me higher and higher. I was quivering, the need for release part of every scream and moan.

Alessio trapped my nipple in his warm mouth and my eyes rolled back in my head as my moans turned husky.

His tempo turned harsher and faster, turning me into a blubbering mess and all the while his tongue teased my nipples.

"Alessandro, please," I begged. I was so close to my orgasm. My eyelids fluttered closed, the emotion building with each hard stroke.

"Look at me, Autumn," he demanded.

Snapping my eyes open, I met adoration in his gaze as my body exploded into an earth-shattering orgasm. He continued thrusting, pumping into me hard and his pelvis grinding against my clit. Shudder after shudder rolled through my body.

Once every shudder had been drained out of me, Alessio's cock slid out of my drenched pussy and insecurity hit me. He was still rock hard.

"We're not done." His voice was hoarse; his eyes full of lust. "All fours. Now."

I scrambled to obey, my hands and knees hitting the small mattress. His hand swept my hair to the side and I tilted my head. I watched as his hands came to my hips, those graceful fingers gripping my flesh. My pussy clenched as he pulled my hips higher, so my ass was thrust higher into the air.

"Hard and fast, right?" The raspy note of his voice sent a shiver through my body.

"Yes." The word barely left me when he slammed back into me in one hard thrust. I screamed his name, my pussy clenching around his cock. He felt deeper inside me than ever before. His other hand came to my hair and fisted my ponytail. He tugged on my hair so my mouth was closer to him. His lips slammed down on mine, his tongue invading my mouth roughly while his cock pounded in and out of me.

Another orgasm fast approached. Fireworks built in my bloodstream. His grunts filled the cabin. Slick sweat

covered my skin. He pounded into me, the thrusts so rough that the springs squeaked. Heck, it could be that the entire cabin was shifting.

Every inch of him filled me to the hilt. I rolled my hips up, greedy for more, causing friction.

"Who do you belong to?" he rasped as flames of desire burned hotter and brighter inside me. His fingers dug into my flesh. "Who?"

His voice skirted on the edge of control. His thrusts picked up a pounding rhythm.

"You," I screamed. "A-always you." His harsh breathing mixed with mine. He hit that spot that caused my back to bow. And all the while, Alessio fisted my hair. My orgasm slammed into me and all the while Alessio fucked me harder and deeper. My throat was raw from my screams. The pleasure roared through my body and he bit my shoulder, his own body shuddering with his release. His throbbing cock spurted hot cum inside me and I lost myself in him.

This must be what standing in the middle of a hurricane felt like. Every ounce of my strength was wrung out of me. My body trembled in his arms and he smoothed a hand over my back, his rough palm following the path of my spine.

"I got you," he whispered into my ear, shifting us so that he lay on his back with me safely nestled in his arms. "I'll always have you."

That night I slept in his arms, his body spooning mine dreaming of our future.

The future that crumbled to ashes not too long after I snapped the pictures of the most breathtaking landscape and the man that was as wild as the lush Cardamom Mountains.

"Autumn." Alessio's voice chased the memory away, while my fingernails dug into my palms. At least I was smart enough not to touch him. "Autumn?"

"Hmmm."

"Did you hear me?" he asked.

Annoyance shot through me. "Yeah." Crap, what did he say? I was totally not listening, the memories sweeping me away. Ugh, sometimes amnesia would be welcomed.

The fog started to rise, hiding the moon's glow. It reminded me of us.

Alessio brought the car to stop with screeching tires and I stiffened. I didn't think I missed anything important. Did I?

The silence followed. I couldn't quite decipher whether it was ominous or just tense. Maybe nerve-wracking.

"What?" I finally snapped, my skin pulled taut.

There was only so much tension I could handle. And this fucking car was too small for both of us. Thank fuck he didn't drive his Bugatti. That was even smaller than this Land Rover.

"You're going to marry me."

An ominous silence followed. With some crickets chirping, like daggers promising death.

"Breathe." I didn't realize I held my breath until that very moment. A loud swish of air left my lungs in a totally unflattering manner. I took a deep breath and then let it out again, my lungs expanding with oxygen.

"Are. You. Fucking. Nuts?" I hissed. This was certainly not the way I ever thought a man's proposal would happen. If it could be called a proposal. "First of all, Alessandro, your proposal skills suck. Big time," I gritted. "And secondly, I'd rather slash my own throat than marry someone like you."

His eyes, equal parts ice and fire, filled with fury and a muscle in his jaw tightened. His eyes darkened and something bitter passed through his expression.

When he said nothing, I continued. "Tell someone who fucking cares," I said coldly, repeating the words he had told me four years ago. "Those were the last words you

spoke to me four years ago. And now you think I'll just forget it all."

A snicker left my lips. Alessio closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, his expression pained.

The petty, stupid part of me filled with satisfaction that I got to him. The fact was he hurt me and didn't even give enough of a shit to apologize. And now he thought I'd marry his cheating ass.

No, thank you.

"If you refuse to move in with me and marry me, you violate the contract."

I stilled, then shot him a confused look. Big mistake, because a self-satisfied smile made an appearance. That bad boy smile - the kind that I used to love and would mold my lips to his so I could feel his smile.

"You come from the Corsican mafia. I made a deal with your grandparents."

This couldn't be good. "So?"

My voice sounded strange to my own ears. I remembered my mother's words. The agreement they made with my grandparents. But they never came to collect.

"I made a deal with them," he drawled, the smug look on his face sending an alert through me. "To secure their presence in Philly, I have supplied them with the product they needed. Their greatest desire is for you to rule the Corsican mafia, like your mother was raised to do. Since your skills are lacking, the next best thing was for them to marry you off. That's where I came into play. So I signed a marriage contract binding you to me."

"A contract?" I repeated stupidly, my mind unable to comprehend.

"Yes, a contract. It cost me close to a billion but then I have many more billions to spare," he said, satisfied with his victory.

A choked laugh escaped me. "You are fucking insane, you know that?" I seethed. "My grandparents have zero

rights to me. I don't even fucking know them. And secondly, if you think I'd honor something so fucking ludicrous, you don't know me at all."

There it was again. That arrogant fucking smile I hated so much. Or loved. I couldn't fucking decide.

He casually leaned back into his expensive leather seat, pulled out a cigarette and lit it up, inhaling deeply. I watched his mouth, remembering that first night with him. In his penthouse. After I gave him my virginity.

"Did you ever wonder why none of the boys approached you in college?" he asked casually. I blinked. The sudden change of subjects was giving me whiplash. It was hard to keep up. "Because you have been mine since I first saw you. Because if a single man had touched you, I would have skinned him alive."

"You're definitely insane," I hissed.

"You have no idea," he retorted dryly. "You and I are going to be spending a lot of time together. So get used to it."

A choked laugh filled the space between us. "This is a free country and I'm a free woman. So thank you, but no thank you. I'll be on my merry way and *will not* spend time with you."

"Do you ever wonder?" he asked.

I curled my fingers into my lap, annoyed and mad. At him. At myself. "You're gonna have to be a bit more specific. I wonder about a lot of things."

"Do you ever wonder where we'd be today if things ended differently four years ago?"

Was he for-fucking-real?

"Why are you doing this?" There was a hint of vulnerability in my voice. He caused it. I hated it.

"I wondered every goddamn day," he rasped. "Every fucking night as I lay awake in bed and every godforsaken morning I woke up." I swallowed, emotions getting the best of me. I couldn't let him get to me. I couldn't let him break

my heart again. Yet, I felt the damn organ fluttering in my chest. The traitorous, fragile, breakable heart that longed for him for the past four years. "I want you, Autumn. And I'll do whatever is necessary to keep you this time."

"I'm not an object," I snapped. "You can't make someone do whatever you want. Just because *you* want it."

"But you want it too." He sounded so damn sure of himself, it made me hate him and my stupid heart. "Nothing has ever felt as good as you and I together. You make sense. We make sense together."

"We make absolutely no sense," I said, my voice too soft. Too low. I should be screaming at him. Telling him to burn in hell. I couldn't.

"You're lying to yourself and me. You want me. At least your body does." Goddamn him for switching tactics on me. "For now, I'll take that. Until I can fix everything else."

"There is no fixing us."

His hand reached over and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. His fingers lingered there, brushing against my sensitive skin and a shudder rolled down my spine,

"I can still remember how your pussy strangled my cock. How you shuddered underneath me, begging me to go harder and faster. I remember every single moment with you. I can make it good for you again."

Suddenly, I could hear nothing but the drumming of blood in my ears. Every inch of my skin buzzed and ignited like it was on fire. The need vibrated under my skin, his warm scent numbing all my reasonable sense. A heaviness settled between my legs and I had half a mind to beg him to ease it.

I was wound up so tight, I thought I'd fucking explode or burn to ashes like that fucking cigarette. Four years without sex was a very long time.

"No." My voice was throaty, betraying how much he affected me. "No to all of it. Marriage. You. Me. Us. No to everything."

He made a rough sound of anger or maybe it was disappointment.

"You will marry me, Autumn Corbin." His deep voice finally broke the moment. "You want to know why?"

Don't fall for it. Don't fall for it. "Why?" I breathed, while his gaze burned me.

"Because I'll destroy everything you love if you refuse." He put the car back in drive and pulled away from the side of the road. "Trust me, love, I have the means for it." He flashed me that bad boy smile that promised trouble and like a fool I fell for it. "Pack your shit tonight. I'm taking you and Kol to my place."

And this was why it was safer to hate him. He would rather destroy me than love me. He'd already proved that once. As if I needed the reminder.

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CHAPTER 26

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ALESSIO



There'd be no escaping me.
Not this time.

I pulled up to the Corbin residence and Autumn jumped out of the car, slamming the door behind her.

As she strode away from me, she flipped me the bird over her shoulder. Okay, so she was upset.

She'd get over it. Eventually. I hoped.

She went into her parents' home and it took all of one second for her mother to show up at the door.

For a woman who grew up surrounded by luxury and a fucking fortress, Mrs. Corbin downgraded significantly. Though by the looks of it, she didn't mind it one bit.

The charming, two story home of three thousand square feet was surrounded by a white picket fence. There was a large vegetable garden off to one side with fruit trees spread over the yard, while on the opposite side a wide opening of green lawn stretched for two acres, every single inch covered by leaves. It was fall heaven.

Autumn's father certainly changed his lifestyle. From the guy that chased criminals and locked them away to a security consultant who spent most of his time tending to his garden alongside his wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Corbin were one of those beloved couples and their own happiness projected to everyone around. No

wonder Branka fell for their charm. Maybe Mrs. Corbin could understand Branka better than most. Growing up in the Corsican mafia exposed her to the cruelty of the underworld. Fuck, she battled the DiLustro's and other criminals right alongside her father sometimes.

I exited my car and Mrs. Corbin waited by the door for me.

"Mrs. Corbin," I greeted her as I reached the residence.

"Alessio Russo." Her voice was cold and her eyes narrowed on me. "What is going on?"

"Your daughter and Kol will be staying with me," I told her coldly.

"So you're the reason they never came," she stated matter-of-factly.

I didn't bother answering her. She could go ask her parents about the details. All I cared about was that Autumn and Kol were with me.

Her dark eyes, unlike her daughter's, darted over the horizon. It took a second before she returned her eyes to me. "Listen to me, Alessandro Russo." I stiffened at her warning. Nobody ever fucking dared to warn me. "I left that life behind. But if you make my daughter cry again, or my grandson for that matter, I won't hesitate to use the skills my father taught me one last time."

My lips tugged up. I liked Autumn's mother. "Duly noted."

Her husband showed up, his expression dark. I was surprised it took him that long. But then his wife wasn't exactly helpless. He didn't look happy either. Too fucking bad. Autumn was my woman and that little boy was my son.

Jesus, it'd take a while to get used to saying that. My son.

Yet, each time I thought about it a smile touched my lips and my chest grew full. I only found out about him and already, I'd die for him. For both of them.

But it'd be best if Autumn didn't know that. She might expedite my death.

"What do you think you're doing?" Autumn's father barked. Okay, that didn't take long at all.

"Derek, that's not how we treat guests," his wife scolded him. Apparently, she had forgotten that mere seconds ago she herself threatened me.

"Mr. Corbin, I'm here to take Autumn home."

"Don't you Mr. Corbin me, Russo!" he gritted. I never knew the even tempered man had the attitude in him. "She is home." He didn't wait for my answer. "Where are you taking my daughter and my grandson?"

"To my place," I told him calmly. "They'll be safe there and you can visit anytime you wish. And they can visit you anytime they wish."

"This is their home," he snapped.

"Their home is with me," I said coldly. "And I won't hesitate to make *anyone* that tries to take them from me pay."

It sounded like a threat. To her parents. The truth was, I'd never hurt them because Autumn loved them so much. But a little incentive never hurt anyone.

"It was bound to happen eventually," Mrs. Corbin mumbled, then took her husband's hand and patted it gently. They shared a look, silent understanding passing between them. "He hurts us, we hurt him. It doesn't really matter. As long as Autumn has decided and agreed to go with him, we have to respect it. But if he makes her cry, then we take him out."

Jesus Christ. Was that how a normal marriage looked?

I wouldn't fucking know. I hadn't seen a single normal relationship in my entire goddamn life. The only normalcy in my life was that short period with Autumn.

"You better be good to her," Autumn's father warned quietly. "To her and Kol." Or else hung in the air. I couldn't blame him and that made me respect him more. "If I see

my daughter cry, I'll come after you, Russo. I don't care who your friends are."

My lips tugged up. Twice in less than five minutes. That must be a record. "Noted, Mr. Corbin."

Autumn showed up behind her parents with Kol in her arms and a large overnight bag. Kol's alert eyes studied me curiously. My chest swelled with so many emotions. I feared I'd become a fucking pussy, and I couldn't give two fucks.

He was my kid. My son. And he was fucking perfect. As he studied me, I studied him. He had his mother's hair but definitely my eyes. My face too. The few photos I'd seen of myself when I was a kid, Kol was my spitting image.

"Hello, Kol," I said, keeping my voice low. My own father always roared and I fucking hated it. "I'm Alessio."

"Hi. You Maman's friend?"

I swallowed. Good God, was it normal to feel so emotional? He didn't seem sleepy. It was only seven at night. I thought it was a bit early for bedtime, not that I knew much about kids.

"Yes, I'm your Maman's friend," I confirmed. My eyes darted to Autumn who was watching us with a guarded expression. Her eyes shimmered and she chewed on her bottom lip. As if she attempted to keep herself together.

I reached for the straps of Autumn's shoulder bag and felt a tremble in my hand. My fucking hand shook from the need to touch my son. I shut it down fast and slid the large overnight bag off Autumn's shoulder.

"Need me to grab anything else?" I asked her, keeping my eyes on Kol.

"Our travel bags are still packed," she murmured. "I want to leave some stuff here."

The pulse in her neck beat wildly and I wondered if she was already contemplating an escape. Bitter amusement filled me. She hadn't even spent one night with me and she already planned on running.

"Leave it then," I told her, my voice calm while my insides boiled. "I'll order everything else."

I'd research what a three-year-old needed. "Alessio, you can have my car seat for Kol," Mrs. Corbin offered and earned herself a glare from her husband and daughter. "Not to worry, darlings. He knows I'll have his head on a spike if something happens to my daughter or grandson."

"Thank you." Okay, I'd start with buying the safest car seat tonight.

Five minutes later, Kol was strapped safely into his car seat and Autumn's parents lingered on their front porch as we shut the door.

I opened the door to my Land Rover but before she could get into the car, my hand wrapped around her slim wrist.

"You run, and I'll burn this motherfucking world down to find you," I told her in a soft voice, keeping my tone low. "You and Kol belong with me."

They were mine now. I'd never let them go.

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CHAPTER 27

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AUTUMN



Alessio was blackmailing me.

The bastard was blackmailing me. First the threats from his father and now this. I was free for five fucking minutes and then Alessio trapped me again. A fucking contract. But he had another thing coming if he thought I'd just accept it. I didn't give a shit what my grandparents agreed to. They were nothing to me. Two strangers I had never met.

We got to Alessio's penthouse, and he showed us to Kol's room.

He turned around to leave, when my voice stopped him. "Where is my room?" I demanded to know, keeping my voice low.

His gaze found me and a shudder rolled down my spine. Jesus, maybe alcohol still lingered in my system. Or maybe it was just him. This damn man.

"You know where our room is," he answered.

"I want my own room," I insisted.

"No." Agitation shot through me, but before I could say another thing, he disappeared into his office.

Goddamn him!

For the next hour, Kol roamed Alessio's penthouse, his eyes curiously exploring every inch of it. And me with him.

The place was just as I remembered it. It was as if he hadn't changed a single thing in all these years.

How many women has he brought here since? I thought bitterly.

I fixed a simple dinner for Kol and myself. His favorite, mac and cheese with peas, while I had grilled cheese. Kol liked to take his time eating so I took the opportunity to edit a few photos on my laptop while he ate, making a disaster out of his seat.

Afterwards, I had to carry him into the bathroom like a sack of potatoes and all the while he shrieked happily, leaving a trail of peas and macaroni in our wake.

"Alessio is not going to be happy about his prestigious bamboo hardwood getting all smudgy," I told my son softly. "But then he demanded we stay here, so he had it coming. Didn't he?" I grinned as another happy high-pitched squeal left him.

Once in the bathroom, I shut the door and let him roam around as I filled the bathtub. Then I took off his clothes and put him in the tub with the bubbles. The moment his toe hit water, he commenced his splashing, shrieking happily.

These were my favorite parts of the day. Simple moments when I kneeled next to the tub while Kol babbled and splashed excitedly. It was always new and exciting to him.

Kol waved his hands and brought them down, making another splash and getting me all wet. It made me laugh - loud and carefree.

"You're making a major mess, Kol," I scolded him softly. "Alessio's going to kick us out."

Not a bad idea. It was one way to cut this stay short.

"There is no chance of that ever happening." A deep voice came from behind me and I glanced back to find Alessio leaning against the doorframe, his eyes on little Kol who was waving his hands excitedly.

Alessio took two steps and stood over the tub, looking at Kol. It was as if he studied him. I followed his gaze to my son. Alessio studied Kol's scar. Right above his heart. Each time I saw it, a pang of terror shot through me.

The screams. The pain. The smoke. I could still taste it.

"It's a scar," I whispered, my voice hoarse and my heart stuck in my throat.

The memory. The terror. I could still taste it on my tongue.

The high-pitched scream of my baby rang in my ears for days after that.

Alessio's father pushed the lit cigarette into my baby and a scream shattered through the hospital room. Kol's. Mine.

"Get away from him!" I threw myself on him, my fists hitting against his back.

He pushed me off easily, my back and skull hitting the cold hospital tile. Black dots swam through my vision. My body was weak, but I kicked and clawed at him, trying to get to my son.

His fingers fisted my hair, my scalp burning as he pulled it, then lifted my head and slammed it hard against the tile. Smoke filled my lungs. My hand wrapped around his wrist, my fingernails digging into his skin.

My head hit the cold floor again and this time, I twisted my head and bit into his hand. Hard.

He slapped me hard across the face and my body flew across the floor towards the little hospital crib.

"Dare to touch him and I'll kill you," I croaked, the metallic taste of blood and fear heavy in my mouth. I was the only one standing between him and my son. Actually, kneeling since my legs were too weak to support me rising to my feet. "I'll make sure my parents and my grandparents know what you have done to their heir. Are you able to fight the Corsican mafia?"

I was grasping for straws. I had no idea where the thought came from. But it scared him. I could see it on his face.

"So you finally came to terms with it, huh?" he snickered. "Your mother would have been something as the head of that family. Lethal and efficient. Listen to me, little Autumn. Approach Alessio, and I'll burn your entire family to the ground. Starting with your father and ending with your little bastard son."

With that final threat he left me and Kol behind.

"Who did that to Kol?" Alessio's voice was calm, but a hint of vehemence showed through.

The man was dead. He was no longer a threat. Should I tell him? I trusted Alessio never to hurt Kol. My heart was an entirely different thing. I knew in my heart that he would never hurt Kol. He would never hurt me. Physically. My heart was something entirely different.

Sometimes it was best to leave ghosts where they belong. In the past.

I was older now. Hopefully a little bit smarter. I recognized Alessio's scars now because Kol's scar was exactly the same. Cigarette butts. It twisted my heart to think of what Alessio had to endure as a child.

He was a product of a fucked up family. It made me appreciate my own family even more. The confession that Kol was his burned in my throat. There was just something about seeing Alessio in the same room with his son that made me want to confess to him that Kol was his.

It wasn't something I ever intended to keep from him. I wanted Kol to have both of us, but things worked out differently.

A pang of guilt shot through me.

I should tell him now. I knew I should. Yet, those last words he spoke to me in London held me back. He hurt me. Broke my heart. He had never admitted nor apologized. It was a two way street. I owed him nothing.

Yet, keeping his son away from him felt so much worse. Unless he didn't want a kid.

It wasn't like we ever talked about it.

"Are you ever going to trust me, Autumn?"

A simple question. A complicated answer.

"I trusted you once," I choked in a soft voice, turning my back to him. "I'm not inclined to do it again. Besides, you never trusted me."

It was true. He made me happy four years ago. My heart was his and all the while, he kept himself locked up tight behind a wall.

I brushed my fingers over Kol's wet hair, that innocent face staring back at me with so much love. I'd like to think that Alessio had at least that when he was that age.

"Do you need help?" Alessio offered, his voice hoarse.

I turned my head to watch him over my shoulder, slightly shocked at his offer. I remained staring at him with my mouth parted. Without waiting for my answer, Alessio unbuttoned his suit jacket and slid it off his broad shoulders, then discarded it against the bathroom counter.

He joined me on the marble tilted floor, his eyes zeroed on Kol.

"Hey, buddy," Alessio greeted Kol softly. "Are you having a good time?"

Kol nodded, smiling wide. "We'll have to build you a cool bedroom here," Alessio said softly. "It's been awhile since I made furniture. But maybe a bed in the shape of a car?" Alessio making furniture? Now that was something I had to see. Kol shook his head. "Okay, no car. How about a bed in the shape of a plane?"

Kol let out an excited squeal and started splashing water with both his hands and little legs.

"Okay then." Alessio smiled and I stared at his face, mesmerized. I had never seen him so relaxed. Happy. "We'll build you the best plane bed any boy has in this city."

We sat there for a while longer, neither one of us talking while Kol kept babbling in baby talk. It was a perfect family moment and all the feelings I buried so deep inside me started to break free.

The wings fluttered. The love I convinced myself I didn't feel broke through. But I couldn't forgive him. Those words he spat at me cut deep.

"Okay, buddy," I started, raising up to my full height. "It's time to get out."

Swiftly, Alessio rose up. "Let me," he offered and took Kol out of the water, uncaring of the water dripping all over his expensive suit.

Together we dried him off, then put him into his pjs with little planes and trains all over it. Afterwards, we read him a story together. With each passing page, Kol demanded that Alessio read another page.

It's that easy to get demoted by your son, I thought wryly to myself.

Kol's eyes drooped, heavy with sleep.

"Okay, last page," I whispered softly to Alessio. His eyes lowered to Kol, and for a moment, I thought I saw pride flicker in his gaze.

Pride and love. The kind that would make you sacrifice the world for a child.

My breath hitched in my lungs and I froze, waiting. For what, I didn't know.

Alessio finally met my gaze. Something raw and vulnerable waged in his eyes. The look in his gaze no longer burned but it grabbed hold and hung on.

He leaned over our son's small body and pulled me gently by the nape.

Soft kiss. Heavy heart. Dark as sin possession.

"I'm never letting you go." A simple statement wrapped in so many layers of complication.

He left in a hurry, leaving me speechless and staring after him. Was I hurt he was leaving my first night back?

He insisted we come tonight. Right away. No running away.
What. The. Fuck. Ever!

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CHAPTER 28

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ALESSIO



The music played softly in the background as I walked down an aisle of the store. I had two men watching the penthouse to ensure Autumn and Kol were safe. And that she didn't leave. I had to leave them - to get some space and more importantly to get everything we needed for my son.

Our son.

Ricardo insisted on coming along.

"You know one of the men could have done this," he grumbled.

I didn't care. Kol was mine and I'd get what we needed.

With a phone in one hand and an app open, I added things to my online cart, while at the same time I pushed a cart down the aisle. It was safe to say, I had never in my goddamn life pushed a shopping cart down a store aisle.

"So she's staying this time?" Ricardo wouldn't drop the subject. He could be such a persistent motherfucker.

"If you say I told you so, I'm going to knock you out with this fucking car seat," I grumbled.

Four years ago, he left my townhouse just as Autumn showed up. I had a plan of cutting her loose. He disagreed. He thought we should cut my father loose. I was up for killing my father except that it would put Autumn in even

more danger. His associates would follow. We would have put her in the midst of it all.

My father didn't hesitate to send someone after her once. If I would have kept her, he wouldn't have stopped.

"I wasn't gonna say it," he said dryly. "You just did."

By this point, the cart was full. Car seats, baby gates, safety covers for receptacles, clothes, toys, more clothes. And at the same time, I kept clicking the 'Buy' button for things I'd need to build my son a bed like I promised.

"I never told you, I stayed outside your place that day," he started. There was no need to ask what day. When he came back, there wasn't a single item in that townhome that wasn't damaged. The blonde scurried out the back door. She was paid to play a part and nothing else. I never touched her.

"If you are up for reminiscing about the bad old days, I'm really going to shove you into that car seat," I warned, hiding the turmoil inside me. That day in London haunted me every day. It was me that caused the sadness in her eyes that day. Her lip quivered but she tried to stay strong. She was so full of pride.

He ignored my threat and continued. "When she left your place, I followed her a few steps. Wanted to make sure she got back to her hotel safely. She broke down." My heart twisted. "Her mother was there to catch her." No wonder the woman hated me. I was surprised she didn't come and finish me off that day. After all, I had no doubt her father had taught her how to kill and make it look like an accident. "Autumn was in pretty bad shape."

And it was me that caused it. She told me she had something important to share with me. Was it that she was pregnant? If I had known, I'd have changed it all. I would have gone after my father, consequences be damned.

But that was the thing. There was no changing what happened. Only our present and future.

TWO HOURS LATER, I brushed past two of my men in the lobby and took the elevator up to my penthouse. I'd ask them to bring up the stuff tomorrow. I didn't want to wake Kol up trying to unpack the bags and boxes filling my Land Rover. If I knew Autumn, she'd probably want to go to her parents.

Once inside my penthouse, I went straight to the bar and poured myself a glass of scotch. The penthouse was enveloped in darkness, the only glow coming from Montréal's city lights pouring through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Restlessness ghosted down my spine. Tension coiled beneath my skin, and I knew it had something to do with the raven-haired woman that was currently in my bed.

At least she better fucking be there. I didn't deserve her. I fucked it all up four years ago. But I still wanted her. It had always been her.

Downing the drink in one gulp, I went to check on Kol in his room. He slept peacefully, sprawled over the entire bed and a soft smile on his lips. He must be having good dreams.

Another thing Autumn did right.

She allowed our son to have peaceful dreams. No fucking nightmares for him. I honestly couldn't remember ever sleeping that peacefully when I was a kid. Four years ago, during those short months, I slept soundly when Autumn was in my arms. Kuala Lumpur. Japan. Cambodia. It didn't matter, as long as she was with me.

Kol shifted on his bed and laughed in his sleep. My lips tugged up softly. God, I loved him. So fucking much that it scared me. I'd kill anyone who tried to taint a single speck of his innocence. The curtains were half open and the moon offered the natural nightlight.

My chest fucking ached at the beautiful sight. I bent down and kissed his forehead, then pulled a cover over him so he wouldn't get cold. Fall temperatures could be brutal here.

Leaving the door slightly cracked, I went to my room. The bed was empty. I wasn't surprised. Disappointed, but not surprised.

I went to the next spare bedroom. And then the next one. I found her in the fifth one, sleeping soundly on her side facing the windows. I recalled when she loved sleeping facing the window in my bed too. And every hotel we slept in together.

I gently scooped her up and carried her back to my bedroom, placing her on the same side she slept before. She barely stirred as I covered her up.

She stretched one foot, leaving her one thigh outside of the covers. Her lips were slightly parted. Her breathing was even and smooth, her dark lashes fanning her cheeks and making her seem like a fallen Madonna in my bed.

Satisfaction washed over me and my chest rumbled with a feeling I hadn't felt in four years.

This was where she belonged.

In my bed. In my home. In my life.

Although, I didn't think Autumn agreed. Even in her sleep, she attempted to put distance between us. She shifted again and scooted so close to the edge of the bed, another inch and she'd fall off the bed.

I strode into my closet and undressed down to my boxers, washed off, then slid under the covers.

Staring at the dark ceiling, I took a deep breath in, letting her fall scent seep into my lungs. That smell was everywhere already.

In my car. In the penthouse. In my bathroom. In my bed.

I turned my head and watched her small silhouette curled on her side, her back towards me. That raven hair

spilled all over the pillows and my fingers itched with the need to touch her.

Just one touch.

I reached out and wrapped one silky jet-black strand around my finger. It was as soft as I remembered.

Fuck, she was perfect. And now I was rock hard.

I let the piece slide off my finger and bounce back onto the soft feather pillow. I should go to sleep, yet with my painfully hard cock, straining for her, it'd be impossible to find sleep.

Maybe I shouldn't have insisted she sleep in my bed.

Karma was a bitch indeed.

The desire raged inside me, burning every single reasonable thought until only her warm scent and the visions of how she'd look writhing underneath me remained. Her breathing pattern slightly changed, but my brain couldn't process that realization.

My groin pulsed, demanding release.

She was too close to me. Not close enough.

Autumn had been buried so deep into my soul for so long, she was the only thing I ever wanted. The only woman to get me hard anymore. The last four years had been hell without her. The possibility of living the rest of my life without her made me want to end it all. Instead, I followed her photographs and career.

I stalked her on social platforms. The temptation was too great and I needed to be sure she was okay. Every photo posting gave me that assurance. So did Branka, but my little sister was stingy with information.

I glanced over to Autumn. She still hadn't moved. Fuck, this was torture. If I only rolled her onto her back, I could slide between her thighs. Taste her pussy. Would she welcome me back?

I returned to stare at the ceiling, trying to ease my heartbeat and stop thinking so I'd get some sleep. *Maybe I*

should count sheep, I mused to myself, but I already felt my mind drifting.

I closed my eyes and wrapped my hand around my cock. I was hard and swollen, drops of pre-cum already smearing over it. I remembered her soft moans. Her soft body. Her eagerness and how she thrashed under me, begging for more.

A low groan vibrated in my chest as I fisted my cock and cupped my balls, just the way she used to do. My grip tightened and a harsh breath pierced through the fog in my brain. It wasn't my breath.

My movement stilled and my eyes opened to find Autumn's eyes locked on my hand fisted around my cock.

Her cheeks were flushed, her mouth parted. Her eyes so fucking green, I could get lost in them.

My cock pulsed, recognizing the woman that brought me so much pleasure.

"You smell so good," I grunted, resuming. I pumped up and down. Hard and rough. Fuck, I needed her so fucking much. If she'd feel a fraction of this, I'd be buried deep inside her now.

"Ditto," she breathed and lifted that beautiful gaze, meeting mine. It was then that I saw it. Her own lust reflected in her hazel depths.

Our eyes locked, she shifted over to me, barely an inch but I took it. I inhaled deeply and watched her through my half-lidded gaze.

"Four years of jerking off with you on my mind," I hissed, fisting myself faster and faster.

She inched her way closer and before I realized what she was doing, her hand came to mine, removing it and wrapping her small hand around my shaft.

"Fuck." A loud groan vibrated through the dark bedroom and my head fell back. She started pumping, up and down. Her soft hand felt so much better than mine. My eyes closed and my breathing harshened. "That's right, love."

She paused her movements. Goddamn it, I wanted to touch her so bad. It clawed at my chest. Her touch was a cure that would make me even more addicted to her.

I opened my eyes and our gazes met. Need. Desire. Ache.

Everything I felt for her, reflected in her own eyes. Or maybe my mind was projecting.

But there was something else in her eyes. Something that wasn't there before.

Hurt. Walls. She held herself back.

"I don't forgive you." And there was my confirmation of the damage I've done. "For any of it." I nodded. There was so much to say and no words good enough to explain. "You're just an itch I have to scratch."

A sardonic breath left me. Okay, that one hurt. "Then scratch it, love."

"I-I just want to get off." Her tongue swept over her bottom lip. "And you happen to be here."

"Then use me," I rasped. "I'll give you whatever you need. Everything." I watched her delicate neck bob as she swallowed, then took her lip between her teeth. I still remembered how good her mouth felt wrapped around my cock. "I'll take whatever crumbs you throw my way, Autumn."

She blinked, confusion and desire battling in her eyes.

"I want you to feel good, too," she murmured. And that was the reason she was different from me. I took and took. She took and gave. It was who she was.

"Anything you do to me will feel good," I assured her while my cock throbbed painfully. Just seeing her was enough to spill. Her hand on me had me already ready to spill. I just needed another pump and like an addict, I was ready to beg her for it.

"Can I straddle you?" A barely audible request but my hands registered it before my mind did.

I grabbed her waist and placed her on top of me, her knees spread, one on each side of me.

I could feel her hot pussy so fucking close to my cock. All I had to do was push her panties aside and thrust inside her. Sweat beads formed on my forehead, a tremor buzzed through me with the need to bury myself inside her.

But I couldn't do it to her. Not unless she wanted it. Unless she was ready.

"C-can you touch me?" she begged, our eyes locked and our faces inches apart.

I pushed her panties aside at the same time her hand wrapped around my cock again. Her moan and my grunt mixed. "It won't take me long," I growled. "All I have to think about is your hot pussy choking my cock."

"Alessandro," she whimpered, her hips rocking into my touch as I rubbed her clit.

Our movements somehow synchronized. Our eyes lowered between our bodies, my hand cupping her pussy and fingering her. Her small hand wrapped around my glistening cock, jerking me off. Pumping harder and faster.

I could feel her hot pussy clenching for my finger or cock, just as my dick throbbed for her pussy. My greedy woman ground against my cock. Her movements were jerky and un-practiced and while her hand kept pumping me, my cock would brush against her hot entrance.

I jerked up my hips and a moan slipped through her full, pink lips. "Fuck, more," she breathed.

So I did it again. I was so fucking hard, I'd burst at any moment, but I refused to cum before she got her pleasure. I wanted to see that blissful look in her eyes as she orgasmed, knowing I brought it to her.

Her panties in my way, I took my other hand and ripped them off her. She didn't even pause her movements. Neither did I. Our heavy breathing and grunts were the only sounds filling the darkness.

She brushed her pussy against my shaft and I fingered her harder and faster. Her wetness dripped down my wrist. My free hand grabbed her nape and pulled her next to my face.

"Mine," I grunted, rubbing her clit like my life depended on it. "Your mouth is mine. Your breasts are mine. Your pussy is mine."

"Fuck," she moaned. Her pussy was drenched.

"Your ass is mine." The slickness of her clit as I fingered her faster, the slickness of my cum as she pumped me harder. "Say you're fucking mine."

"Please," she begged breathlessly. "Please, I need--"

Her eyes lowered between us and I followed her gaze. Seeing the two of us jerk each other off. She lowered her body barely an inch and my shaft slid inside her hot entrance.

"Fuck!" I had no idea who said it. Her. Me. Maybe both of us.

Her shudders pushed her down further and the head of my cock pushed at her entrance. She moaned. Long and loud. I grunted. Hard and brutal. Her body trembled as I spurted my cum all over her pussy, our juices mixing together. I hadn't come so hard from jerking off in years.

And the whole time we both watched our bodies almost connected.

But not joined.

I jolted up, my balls aching. And my fucking cock hard as metal.

Autumn must have rolled over and was now facing me. She was still fast asleep, her lips slightly parted, and her breaths came out even and shallow. She looked so damn peaceful. So opposite of me. My own dreams were always disconnected images of shit I've done. Things I couldn't remember when awake. Things I'd probably never remember.

My throat tightened and my gaze found her again. That familiar ache in my chest, the pain that always lived there slowly eased.

Autumn healed my invisible scars and she didn't even know it.

There was no good version of my life without her in it.

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CHAPTER 29

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AUTUMN



I woke up to rumpled sheets and the scent of sandalwood and spice in the air. How did I end up in his bed? I had gone to sleep in the guest bedroom. Being too close to him, never mind sleeping in his bed, was too tempting to break my resolve.

And that would leave a bad taste in my mouth. After everything that had happened between us.

At least Alessio was gone. I heard him get up at the crack of dawn and leave. Burying my face in the pillow, the images from my dream last night flashed through my mind.

Jesus.

Less than a day back in Montréal, and I was already in Alessio's bed. Dreaming of sucking him off. Not that he didn't reciprocate in that fantasy.

Ugh.

My whole body heated up. How could I have let my mind go so far last night? I had to remember that he was a cheater. I had to find a way to get out of this mess.

He did say he was sorry after his father's funeral, my soft heart whispered. The stupid heart. He left it vague. 'I'm sorry' explained nothing.

I shot out of bed and got ready. I threw on a pair of jeans and a rust colored sweater, along with a pair of boots just in the nick of time before Kol woke up.

When I stepped into Kol's room, I found him sitting in the middle of the bed, smiling and wide awake.

"There is my handsome boy," I beamed at him. "Are you ready to go see Grandma and Grandpa?"

"Yes, yes, yes."

I grinned. "I'll shoot them a message and ask them to fix us breakfast and strong coffee. Yeah?"

A nod.

Twenty minutes later, Kol and I were in the lobby, his small hand in mine, our steps slow and making our way for the exit, when a towering frame blocked my way out.

"Umm, excuse me," I muttered and tried to side-step him. He blocked my way again. "Hey!"

"Where are you going?" he demanded to know and I frowned.

"None of your business," I hissed. I recognized him from four years ago. "Now get out of my way before I call the police," I threatened, already pulling out my phone and my finger hovering over the screen.

"Boss didn't say you were going anywhere," he muttered.

My fingers stilled over the first number. "Boss?"

I knew what he meant. Or rather who he meant. But I couldn't believe that the asshole would keep me prisoner.

"Alessio."

Oh, he did not.

My eyes narrowed on the big, towering frame and my hand with my phone shot to his chest.

"You tell Alessio he cannot control my movements," I hissed, my cheeks hot with frustration and all the while poking at his chest. "Actually, never mind. I'll tell him myself."

Before I realized what I was doing, I pulled up his number and dialed him.

"Autumn." My face burned crimson. Images of the two of us last night flashed through my mind. Damn him. "I'm glad

you still have my number.”

I never had it in me to delete it. Not because I still loved him. But because he *was* my child’s father.

“Tell your brute to let me pass,” I grumbled, pissed off that even over the phone, Alessio managed to make me all flustered. “I’m going to visit my parents for breakfast.”

A long pause followed.

With each second that ticked by, my irritation rose another notch. I opened my mouth, ready to snap at him. Scream at him.

“Ricardo will take you.”

“No need,” I protested. “I can take a cab.”

“Either Ricardo takes you or you stay home.”

Anger consumed me. Scratched at my throat. Burned my cheeks. I have traveled the world for the past four years alone. Jungles. Deserts. War zones. I didn’t need a goddamn escort. I was a grown woman.

“This isn’t over,” I spat in a low voice, trying desperately to hold on to my reason. I’d deal with him later. I ended the call and glared at Ricardo. The poor guy was getting the brunt of my anger. “Alessio said you’ll drive us to my parents.”

This was fucking bullshit. I traveled the whole goddamn world, and now I couldn’t go across town to my parents alone.

Fuck. That. Shit.

Ricardo’s phone beeped at that moment. It must have been the instructions from Alessio. If I let the anger boil, I’d end up seeing red and blowing a gasket. So I took a deep breath in and released it. Then I repeated it again.

Ricardo drove us in a black, bulletproof Expedition that had a new car seat in it. And the old one to return to my maman. I didn’t even ask. I just counted the minutes to get to my parents’ home. Before we pulled up in front of their home, my phone beeped.

It was a message from Branka, asking where I was. She was already at my parents' home. How was it that shit always ended up happening all at once? Never nice and slow. I had no doubt that Maman and Dad had given her a version of her brother taking me to his place.

Jesus Christ!

I typed a quick message letting her know that Kol and I were on our way.

WE SPENT ALL MORNING OUTSIDE.

Thick tension permeated the air, dancing between the leaves that swirled around our feet as we picked them up. Thank God we were outside because the tension was so stifling, I could barely get enough oxygen to breathe.

Maman was smart to put us to work, helping with the cleanup of the leaves and the garden. Dad had been grumpy. Maman was worried. Branka was – I wasn't sure. Maybe a combination of a bit mad, a bit disappointed, and a lot worried.

The only one that seemed perfectly relaxed was Kol. He'd push all the leaves into a pile we were building, then throw himself into it. It was part of the reason it took us a long time to clean up the yard.

That was probably Maman's plan all along. Tire us all out, and then we'd talk. She even made us eat lunch while we labored with the damn leaves that kept falling. I honestly saw no point in cleaning them.

It was when Kol finally went to take a nap that my father finally said something.

"Has he hurt you?" I blinked in confusion.

It wasn't exactly the first question I expected. I shook my head. Father meant physically and that was a true answer. He hadn't hurt me physically. Four years ago, when

I caught him cheating, I was devastated. When he told me I was just a fuck to him, I wanted to loathe him. I never quite succeeded.

But physically he had never hurt me.

"Alessio would never hit a woman." Branka sounded insulted on her brother's behalf. She had a right to be.

My father didn't seem to believe either one of us.

It was Maman that tried to soothe the tension. "We know your brother is not your father, Branka. Yesterday was just unexpected. The way it went down and Alessio taking Autumn and Kol- "

"How did it go down?" My best friend's eyes narrowed on me, those grays almost flashing silver. "Because my best friend never even hinted she had something going on with my brother."

I sighed. "Branka--"

She raised her palm. "How did it go down?" she repeated.

A tense silence followed. I honestly didn't know where to start. That was the problem with hiding something for so long.

"Which part?" I finally asked. "Four years ago? Yesterday? Eight years ago?"

"What?" Dad hissed, fury turning his face red. "If he touched you when you were underage, he's a dead man."

"Jesus Christ, you kept this from me for eight years?" Branka screeched.

"Would you all stop?" I scolded them. "The first time I saw Alessio was eight years ago. Here, in fact. Remember the birthday party?"

"Under my fucking roof?" Father roared, his face getting red.

"Putain de merde," Maman cursed. Her favorite curse word. *For fuck's sake*. I couldn't agree more. Dad was taking things to an entirely unnecessary level. "Let Autumn finish!"

"Thank you, Maman." This was definitely not going well. At my age, I really didn't think I had to explain anything to my parents. This was fucking ridiculous. Not to mention, embarrassing. "I only met him at that birthday party. Just for a fraction of a moment." That was mostly true. There was no need to tell them I was half naked. "Then I didn't see him again until your mother's funeral. I swear it."

My eyes kept darting between the three people that had always been there for me. I didn't outright lie to them for the past four years but an omission was still a lie. I hid the truth.

"So when in the hell did you have sex with him?" Branka grumbled.

My cheeks burned. My father looked like he was ready to murder someone. Probably Alessio.

"Umm." I shifted from my left foot to my right, then back again, while my fingers gripped the rake like it'd save me from answering. "Do we have to go into those specifics?"

"I think it's best if we don't." Maman came to the rescue. She had never outright told me she knew Alessio Russo was Kol's father, but considering she found me in London, outside his townhouse and she offered to kill him, I knew she knew. "What's done is done."

Branka's eyes studied my mother. "You knew too, didn't you?"

Maman shrugged. "A mother always knows," she explained. "Autumn never wanted to say it, but it didn't take a genius to put it all together." Maman glanced my way. She was being vague on purpose.

"Kol is the spitting image of Alessio," Branka announced, surprising me with her statement.

I swallowed. If that was true, Alessio probably knew already. Was that the reason he insisted we stay with him? He wanted Kol but not me? Would he try to take Kol away from me? That thought terrified me.

"I need some more time to process this," my father grumbled and headed to the front of the house. "More leaves to pick up."

Maman gave me an exasperated look and followed him back there, leaving me alone with Branka.

I met her gaze with a heavy sigh. "So you knew?" She nodded. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you," I mumbled. "He's your brother and I didn't want you to keep a secret from him. You two are close."

I couldn't tell what she was thinking. This was where our differences came in. Branka, growing up the way she did, was good at keeping a poker face. Me, not so much.

"When... how long have you known?" I asked her.

Her lips pursed, then a flicker of anger flashed in her eyes. At me or someone else, I wasn't sure. "Abu Dhabi," she answered, her voice calm.

God, I hated remembering Abu Dhabi. I hated myself even more for still wanting him and succumbing to my craving for him. My thighs clenched remembering last night. I didn't think I was strong enough to resist him if I spent another night in bed with him.

Stupid woman, my reason whispered.

"What happened?" she questioned. "I want to hear it from you."

I shook my head and my lower lip trembled. Goddamn emotions. They got you nowhere, I swear.

Branka took my free hand into hers and squeezed. "Alessio never said a goddamn thing to me. I started to put the pieces together on my own. When Kol was born, it confirmed my suspicion. Since neither you nor Alessio said anything, I kept waiting. I don't know what happened between you two, but I think it's time you come clean. Both of you."

Letting a shuddering breath out, I felt a tremor in my chest, my heart and my limbs. Four damn years and it still hurt just as it did the first day.

"I went to his room," I said, my voice small. "He had someone else there."

Her incredulous expression stared back at me. "Alessio? Cheating?"

I shrugged, hiding how much it really fucking hurt. "We never really established we were dating."

She shook her head. "No, no, no." I had no idea if she was saying 'no' to my assumption of dating or 'no' to Alessio cheating. "Alessio would never cheat."

Well, he did. But I kept those words behind my lips. I saw him with my own two eyes, both times; otherwise I'd be persuaded by the conviction in my best friend's voice.

"No, Autumn, you don't understand," Branka continued when I remained silent. She must have seen it in my eyes that I didn't believe her. "He saw what Father did to our mother. Alessio's never had a relationship with a woman. Ever. I can't tell you why. He will have to. But I'd bet this was my father's doing."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind my father," she retorted dryly. "May he rot in hell." I couldn't agree more. He was a creepy and cruel motherfucker. The little bits and pieces of what he'd done to Branka were enough to churn any stomach. His visit in the hospital when I gave birth was enough reason to want to murder him. "In Abu Dhabi, after you left. The next day Alessio came down to our floor. He was banging on my door like crazy. He looked like shit. When I accused him of standing me up for lunch, he looked at me like I was crazy. He thought it was the day that we arrived. "

I still couldn't follow what she was saying. "So he had jet lag?" I asked. "That doesn't explain him getting a blow job by another woman the night we were supposed to meet up."

I fucking hated how bitter my voice sounded. Four years should be enough not to care and move on. Except, I didn't. I hadn't dated anyone else. I had gone out to dinner with

men here and there, but it ended after the first date. I compared them all to him. Alessio Russo, the man who broke my heart.

I hadn't kissed another man. Friends didn't count. Ugh, no wonder I dreamt about having sex with him and got all hot and bothered. Wet dreams were a bitch when you haven't had sex in four years.

God, his hands knew exactly how to get me off in my dream. And his mouth-

Instantly, my insides ignited into flames. That was hands down the best dream. It was hot porn worthy. The way he pumped into me, demanding my pleasure before his. And when he spilled inside me, he grunted my name as he finished. Yeah, it was a dream but I'd be sure to keep it stored for nights when I had to get myself off. Women would pay big money to see such a beautiful man unravel.

A strange possessiveness shot through me. I'd have to claw out the eyes of anyone who saw him unravel. Maybe I should talk to him and tell him if we would share a bed, no other women. Or I'd have to turn into a killer.

Fucking lovely. From saving the world to a murderer.

Nothing like going from one extreme to another.

"I'll cut off my pinky if he cheated," Branka tried again. "Talk to him."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm telling you, woman. I saw him with my own two eyes." Not to mention what had happened in London. "It seems your pinky will have to go."

"Everything is not as it seems, Autumn." Branka's voice held that note of vulnerability. The same one she usually had when she talked about her father. "Trust me on this one. Talk to Alessio. Ask him to explain that night."

I sighed. It wouldn't hurt... I guess. At least to get his admission. Or he could deny it, but I knew what I'd seen. Not to mention, I heard those fucking words he threw my way in London.

"Okay," I caved. "I'll confront him. Do *you* forgive me?" I asked. I couldn't bear losing my best friend. "Kol is your nephew and you always treated him as such. And he already considers you his aunt. But none of it makes it right. That I kept him from you." Truthfully, I kept him from Alessio even more.

Assuming he didn't know already.

"I'll forgive you if you talk to him," she said with a conviction I didn't exactly feel. "He's in Kol's life now. Keep him there. Alessio deserves this. He deserves Kol and you."

Branka loved her brother and her loyalty was sometimes blinding. Not that I'd tell her that. He was her savior when she was a little girl. When her mother failed her, her big brother swept in like a knight.

Nothing and nobody would persuade Branka that her brother had a ruthless darkness about him, regardless that it was plain as day. He might be wearing polished, expensive suits and behave like a gentleman but underneath it all, he wore his ruthlessness like a second skin.

"And I'm not mad, Autumn." Branka hugged me tightly. "I've kept a few secrets of my own that I'll never tell Alessio." *Huh?* She must have seen the shock on my face. "He'd go after him and probably kill him. Or he'd kill my brother. Not a good scenario either way."

Branka keeping a big secret from her big brother couldn't be a good thing. Not at all.

"D-do you want to tell me?" I asked, almost scared to hear her answer.

Dark gray clouds reflected in her eyes. They were the color of the sky right before the rain. The same color as Alessio's. The same color as Kol's. Except my son had a speck of green added to them which gave his eyes some color.

"Do you want to know?" I knew what she meant. When we first became friends and everyone in high school

warned me off the Russo girl, we made a pact. She wouldn't tell me what I didn't want to know. But whatever she did tell me, I had to keep between us.

And at this moment, Branka Michelle Russo looked like she needed to offload something from her chest.

"Yes."

She was always there for me. The least I could do was be there for her when she obviously needed someone to talk to.

"I'm getting married."

Silence followed. The words mixed with the rustling of leaves that gently swished with the breeze.

I blinked, then blinked again. Maybe the mind was playing tricks on me.

"I didn't get that. Can you repeat it?"

The expression on her face told me I understood it right.

"I'm getting married," she repeated.

"What? Who? When?" Okay, I couldn't come up with a coherent question. "I didn't know you were seeing someone."

She swallowed. "I'm not."

"I'm confused."

"Alessio arranged a marriage for me," she explained. Her whole demeanor was calm, like we were discussing the most natural event in the world. Arranged fucking marriage. "Well, actually he let me pick among acceptable candidates. I spoke to all of them. This guy and I... well, we came to a mutual agreement. He'll help me and I'll help him. Father managed to make many enemies and this guy will protect me. For years, I thought there was a way out but--"

The shock of her statement had thrown me off-balance. I had a hard time keeping up with her.

"What do you mean a way out?" I asked in a worried voice. "Branka, if you need help, or you need to get away, my parents can help."

After all, Maman and Father had fought more than a few battles and they'd hate to see Branka unhappy. They thought of her as family. She *was* family.

Fury flashed in her eyes, reminding me of pissed off Alessio. Maybe there was more of a badass in Branka than I thought. It would make sense, considering who she grew up around. "What I want is to make that fucker Sasha Nikolaev pay."

Her voice was calm. Deadly. Resolute.

Jesus Christ. Branka hid her savage under her drop-dead gorgeous and cute smile.

"Sasha Nikolaev?" I repeated. The name sounded vaguely familiar but for the life of me, I couldn't place it.

"Yes," she hissed, clearly mad. "He made me promise to wait and then I find him with some fucking Olympic chick. Younger than me!"

I had to be missing something. Or my brain was still fried from last night's orgasm. I couldn't follow a single damn thing she was saying.

"I'm confused," I mumbled.

"Welcome to the goddamn club," she responded, her tone dry as gin. "First the asshole stalks me. Then makes me so fucking hot." She started fanning herself. Although it was barely fifty degrees out here. And it was considered a warm day for November. "But he gives me some shit about not being ready for him. Fuck. That. Shit. I'm so ready that if my vagina were balls, they'd be blue."

A strangled laugh escaped me despite her fury. "I'm sorry," I choked. "The image of a vagina looking like blue balls—"

She blew out a frustrated breath, sending a strand of her warm brown hair flying.

"Yeah, I know. But Autumn, I have to be the oldest fucking virgin in Canada," she groaned. "Fuck, the whole of North America! Possibly the entire world."

Okay, that was definitely an exaggeration. "Well, what happened? And what does an Olympic chick have to do with any of it?"

"Apparently the fucker found himself a younger woman. Wynter Flemming, the Olympic figure skater. From the States." My lips formed a silent O.

There was no mistaking the bitterness on her face.

"Well, you know those athletes can't have sex during training," I muttered the first thing that came to mind. "So he must have major blue balls." Her face lit up with that statement. "And-" I added, happy to make her feel better. "What kind of name is Wynter Flemming for a figure skater?"

"Right?" She eagerly agreed, then our gazes met. "It's actually kind of a cool name," she grumbled under her breath.

I had to agree. It was a pretty cool name but we had to end that girl. "Besides, she's not a Canadian figure skater," I said. "And we all know we have *the best* figure skaters. Just look at Scott Moir and Tessa Virtue. This Wynter Flemming, who I never heard of by the way, cannot be better than Scottie and Tessa."

She waved her hand through the air. "Exactly. Though I have no fucking clue who Scottie and Tessa are either."

It was safe to say that neither Branka nor I were into sports.

"But who is Sasha Nikolaev?" I asked. "Why does the name sound familiar?"

Branka's eyes darkened and her expression turned murderous.

"The man who's going to regret ever meeting me," she hissed. "Before I die, I'm going to carve my initials into his heart. He wanted psychotic, he'll fucking get it."

Jesus fucking Christ.

I wasn't sure whether to feel sorry for Sasha Nikolaev or not, but one thing was for certain.

Branka Russo would make him pay.

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CHAPTER 30

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ALESSIO



I pulled up to the Corbin residence mid-afternoon and found them all outside.

It was a warmer than usual day, and it seemed they were all put to work. Including my sister. Autumn and Branka whispered to each other, both of them leaning against their rakes and slacking. I could see they loved hard labor all the way from here.

I strode through the little gate. Mr. Corbin and Kol looked up, and immediately Kol's whole face lit up and he bolted towards me. His grandfather didn't seem overly happy about it, but it didn't fucking matter to me.

Nothing could beat this feeling. I kneeled down so we'd be at a similar height, just as Kol threw himself into my arms and I caught him.

"Hey, buddy." I still couldn't believe this tiny, perfect human was my son. "Missed you today."

He grinned. "I want a story."

I chuckled. "Sure, we can read you another story tonight. I got some more books."

"Can you sing?"

Autumn and her parents loved to sing. It wasn't my thing. Nor the thing of anyone unfortunate enough to hear me sing.

"How about if your mom sings and I read?" I suggested. If he demanded I sing, I would but he'd probably regret it fast.

"Oui."

It was another thing I noticed. Kol spoke French and English interchangeably.

I rose to my full height. Autumn and Branka were still in their own world, in the furthest corner of the yard. Neither one of them had noticed me. Mr. and Mrs. Corbin had, though, and both strode over to me.

"Alessio," Autumn's mom greeted me first.

"Mrs. Corbin."

"I'm making an early dinner," she continued. Her husband immediately followed up with a grumble. "Will you stay?" Yeah, that would be a hard pass. "I'm making everyone's favorite." Still a hard pass. "Please." Slightly weakened pass.

She glanced at her husband.

"Darling, don't you want Alessio to stay?" Autumn's mother was a stubborn woman. "He could help you with the playset you've been working on for a month that's been sitting in the garage."

This time we both grumbled. "That's a yes, right?" She eyed us both with wide eyes. The woman was a master manipulator. So unlike my own mother who always feared to even look up. My father killed her spirit.

"Sure," Autumn's father and I both muttered at the same time.

I took my suit jacket off and threw it over the fence rail.

"Lead the way, Mr. Corbin," I told the old man. "If I help you with the playground, you'll have to help me with the airplane bed I'm going to make for Kol."

Both Kol and his grandmother squealed happily. Autumn's father grumbled.

"Hey, brother!" Branka's voice could probably be heard on the entire street.

"Sister, subtle as always." My eyes flicked to Autumn and instantly that restlessness that was a constant companion eased. I sought out her eyes. Green. Good, she wasn't sad nor unhappy.

Her gaze met mine and instantly her cheeks flushed. I couldn't help the smugness that filled me. Maybe her resolve was weakening. The dream from last night was hard to erase. I'd been going around with a hard-on all goddamn day. My cock wanted her pussy. My fucking tongue wanted to taste her juices.

Fucking great, I'd end up with blue balls.

"Autumn," I greeted her. She grumbled something that resembled a greeting or maybe 'fuck off', I wasn't sure. "How was your day, dear?" She narrowed those beautiful hazel eyes on me, annoyance clear in them. My lips tugged up. No answer. "Your parents invited me to stay for dinner," I drawled.

Her eyes snapped to her father, then mother. The former grumbled; the latter smiled happily. "It will be great. Everyone's favorite. We'll see if Alessio likes it."

"I'm sure it will be delicious, Mrs. Corbin," I said. "Branka has told me your cooking skills are incomparable."

Snorts and snickers filled the air. My eyebrows shot up. My sister spent many dinners here. She wouldn't have eaten here if the food was bad. Would she?

Shit, maybe she would. It was better than sitting alone at my place or putting up with the company of our parents.

"Sure," Branka snickered, and I was positive we'd have to have a second dinner.

Mrs. Corbin clapped her hands eagerly, shooing her husband, Kol, and I towards the garage. We made our way there, Kol's hand in mine.

"Grandma thinks I can't handle building an outdoor playset," Autumn's father grumbled as he opened the wide door. "But we'll show her, won't we Kol?"

My son nodded eagerly, without any intention of releasing my hand. Then he started jumping up and down, squealing. The little boy was a ball of energy.

I squatted down and smiled at him. "Let's help Grandpa, okay?" He nodded again. "Okay, you carry this bag." I handed him the bag of screws and bolts. "Perfect. Grandpa and I will get the beams."

I stood back up to find Autumn's father watching us with those eyes so much like his daughter's. Autumn had her mother's beauty but her father's eyes.

I rolled up my sleeves and we all got to work. Kol glued himself to me, following my every direction. We moved all of the playset parts out of the garage.

"Over here," Autumn's father ordered, pointing to the middle of the yard. My lips curved. I couldn't recall the last time someone gave me an order. My board of directors and my friends would get a kick out of this one. "This is the best spot. We can see it from every corner of the yard and from the living room."

I nodded. It made sense. "He shouldn't be outside alone," I remarked. Autumn's father stiffened. I didn't give a shit. Kol was my son and I wouldn't risk anything happening to him.

"I raised my daughter," he ended up commenting. "Safe and happy. All the while fuckers like you tried to eliminate us."

"Understood," I told him calmly. "But what kind of father would I be if I didn't do the same for my son?"

Silence followed. Surprise flashed in his eyes. He thought I didn't know. Or maybe he hoped I didn't know.

"You and my daughter will have to work that out," he finally said. "My wife told me about the contract you had in place with her parents." I couldn't quite decide if it sounded like an accusation or not. "Are you aiming for more power?"

My jaw tightened. "I couldn't give two shits about more power," I said.

"So what are you going to do when the old Blanchet passes the reins to Autumn?"

"I'll pass them on to someone else."

Curiosity flickered in her father's eyes, but it was the tension in his shoulders that betrayed him. "Who?"

He thought I'd prepare Kol to lead it. "Those French nephews. I've looked into them and they are decent enough."

Silence swept through the late afternoon air.

"I think you and I are on the same page," he finally said. An understanding passed between us. An alliance. "You are not your father, Alessio," her father added, shocking me. "Either one of them."

Somehow it didn't shock me that the old man knew. After all, collecting intelligence against the most powerful criminal organization was his expertise.

We worked in silence for the next two hours and finished the playground. A pirate ship stood in the middle of the lawn and Kol stared at it awed.

"You like it?" I asked him, smiling. His wide eyes kept darting left, then right. He didn't know where to look first.

"Oui."

"It's very cool," I told him. "Want to check out the inside?"

He nodded, tugging me along eagerly. I bent my tall frame, and it was all it took for him to start exploring.

"This is mine?" His voice squealed from the inside of the pirate ship.

"All yours, buddy," his grandpa answered. He turned to me and continued, "It was hard to put together anything permanent when Autumn refused to come home. But now that she's here, nothing is stopping me."

My lips curved. "If you need help with another building project, let me know."

He smiled smugly. "Make sure you have cool boy stuff at your place. It'll make it harder to leave."

"I intend to." In fact, I already placed an order for all the material to build Kol his custom airplane bed. "We're staying at my penthouse right now, but we'll be back and forth between the house outside the city and the penthouse. I figured she'd want to stay close to you."

He waved his hand. "Even before she came back, she already talked about leaving." He side-eyed me. "I'm guessing she'll be staying now."

"That's the plan."

Of course, the contract I had put in place for her was just security. There was no letting her go this time. I'd earn her love and I'd bring us back. The way we were. Both Autumn and Kol were my family. We'd grow old together. We'd bicker, we'd fuck, and we'd make love.

Bottom line, we'd be happy. I'd make sure of it. I'd give her everything she wanted. She'd be close to her parents. We'd make a life for ourselves like her parents.

My eyes traveled over the cozy home. It was a nice size house, although nothing like my estate. And nothing like the Blanchet residence in Philly.

"Maman says dinner is almost ready." Autumn came up behind us with a tray of drinks for all of us. She must have taken a shower, her hair was still damp and she changed into jeans with a pink sweater. "And if you'll be stinky, take a shower."

Her dad took a drink from the tray. "Are those your mother's words or yours, Autumn?" her father retorted dryly.

She ignored him and craned her neck to meet my gaze. "Same goes for you, Alessio." Then her eyes traveled down my body. "You have no spare clothes here, so maybe you'll have to go back to the penthouse."

A sardonic breath left me. Autumn had claws. Truthfully, I didn't mind the banter. It'd make for a great makeup sex.

"Not to worry, love," I mused, taking a drink from the tray. "I have a change of clothes in the car."

"Of course you do," she remarked, rolling her eyes. "Are you ever unprepared?"

"Be nice to our guest," her father defended me, surprising the fuck out of me. "He just built the pirate ship playset for Kol."

"I could have gotten a man from Home Depot to do that," she grumbled.

"But would a Home Depot man build the playground and drive you home?" I mused.

Autumn rolled her eyes. "I see how it is. Men against women. I'll let you eat Maman's cooked dinner. My cooked portion will be only for friends," she said, but her little smile didn't escape me.

Something was up with her Maman's cooking.

"Kol, come on buddy," she called out to him. "Let's go eat stuff that Mommy cooked. We'll leave grandma's cooking for Grandpa and Alessio."

"Grand-mère sing?" Kol mumbled.

"Probably. Now let's go before Aunt Branka eats all the good stuff." She picked up Kol and started walking towards the house. "You two have twenty minutes to get showered. Or no food for you."

Fifteen minutes later, we were all seated around the table in the dining room. Pictures of smiling Autumn decorated the walls everywhere I looked. There were quite a few of Branka and Autumn from their high school years.

There was one that stood out the most. Autumn, Kol, her mother and Branka with their faces tilted up to the sky, catching raindrops with the Eiffel Tower in the background. They looked so fucking happy that it made me both happy and jealous.

"Let's say a prayer," Mrs. Corbin announced. Was she joking or was she for real? The woman was a fucking killer in her young days.

I flicked a look at my sister, then Autumn. They both just shrugged and went along, mumbling the prayer. Kol did too, switching between English and French. I was the only one who had no fucking clue how the words to the prayer went.

"Her kicks for prayers come and go," Autumn whispered in between two prayer words.

I cocked my eyebrow. "Salvation and eternal glory," she choked out, her words full of humor.

"Autumn Michelle Corbin," her mother scolded her. It was another thing Autumn and Branka had in common. Same birthday and same middle name.

Autumn flicked a gaze her mother's way. "What? The trend comes and goes. Even you have to admit that."

Her mother grumbled a few words in French and I was pretty sure they were not the good kind of words.

"Why Autumn?" I asked curiously, shifting the heat away from my woman. "Her birthday is in August."

Her parents shared a look, a hint of anguish passing between them. "Autumn was due in November. My wife's parents kidnapped her, induced her labor prematurely, and attempted to steal Autumn."

What. The. Fuck?

Autumn's grandparents kidnapped their own daughter and risked not only their daughter's life but Autumn's too by doing shit like that. Those fuckers would be dead before the week was over.

"Let's not forget the deal of turning me over on my eighteenth birthday," Autumn retorted dryly.

"We weren't going to let them just take you," her father chimed in.

"Exactly," her maman agreed. "All that is in the past now."

"And here I thought I found a *normal* family," Branka snickered softly.

“Okay, that’s not a topic for our lovely day. We are all a little bit abnormally normal.” She chuckled like it was funny while Branka and Autumn rolled their eyes. “Everyone dig in,” Mrs. Corbin announced. I barely fucking blinked, Autumn and Branka went for the manicotti on the right. They both laughed, stealing food from each other’s forks. And all the while the manicotti on the left remained untouched.

Kol squealed, smashing his plastic plate against the table. “Food,” he demanded.

“Bad Aunt,” Autumn scolded Branka through laughter. “We have a baby to feed here. Eat Maman’s manicotti.”

“You two are the worst,” Mrs. Corbin grumbled. “My manicotti is just as good.”

I went for the platter that nobody wanted to touch, but before I could put it on my plate, Autumn’s hand shot to mine and she shook her head.

“Trust me,” she mouthed, looking at me pointedly. “You’ll die.”

My lips curved up, amused at her playfulness. It reminded me of her four years ago.

“I’m happy you want me alive,” I remarked low, so nobody else could hear me.

Her hazel eyes fell to my lips and darkened. Fuck, it was enough to have my blood rush with a powerful heat. I wanted to explore her body, feel every inch of her again. It had been far too long. I stroked a stray strand of her hair off her eyes with her finger.

She didn’t flinch. She didn’t pull away.

“Kol, no!” Branka hissed and the moment was broken. Both of us turned our heads just in time to catch my sister sweeping all the food off Kol’s plate and giving him her own plate.

“Oh come on,” Mrs. Corbin exclaimed. “It was food poisoning only twice.”

I froze. Food poisoning?

A bunch of grunting followed. "Okay, maybe four. Five tops," Mrs. Corbin added exasperated. "But in twenty-five years. That's normal."

"Maman, once in a lifetime is normal," Autumn snickered. "Twice is attempted murder."

Mrs. Corbin let out a string of French curses. Branka and Autumn chortled. Autumn covered Kol's ears while his grin stretched from ear to ear.

I could finally see the appeal firsthand why my sister loved coming here. It was an easy-going, welcoming, and relaxing atmosphere.

Even with the threat of food poisoning.

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CHAPTER 31

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AUTUMN



Alessio carried Kol's sleeping body already dressed in his pjs. His favorite ones - airplanes all over them. Thank God for grandma.

"We should have gotten home sooner," I murmured softly as we stepped through the penthouse door. My feet came to a halt. Did I just call Alessio's penthouse *home*?

In barely a day. This was moving way too fast. He blackmailed me to get me here for fuck's sake.

"Kol was having a good time," Alessio answered. "I was too. I can finally understand what drew Branka to your parents' home all these years."

I chuckled softly and we started to make our way to Kol's bedroom. "You mean besides the bad food?"

The door of Kol's bedroom was ajar and my breath hitched when I looked inside.

"Oh my gosh," I whispered, my eyes glued to the walls. The entire room was redone. The room was painted dark blue with white planes on the walls and light blue skies for a ceiling. The modern black dresser was gone and in its place, a children's dresser with planes for knobs.

"Do you think he'll like it?" Alessio's voice was soft, low.

I whipped my head to the side, my gaze meeting his. "Like it?" I breathed.

"I'm going to build him that airplane bed, but I'll have to do it in my shop back on the estate."

Returning my gaze to the room, my chest warmed and my eyes burned. "He'll love it," I rasped, my emotions choking me. "Thank you."

The look he gave me seared, dark and hot. It held promises that were too scary to believe. Branka's words flashed in my mind. Talk to Alessio. This was probably a conversation that should have happened four years ago.

"Let's put him to bed," I murmured softly.

He laid him on the bed, and I pulled the covers over him. He looked so peaceful with a little smile on his face. He was always such a good and easy baby. I was very lucky. I pressed a kiss on his forehead. Alessio's gaze was so intense that my insides shook. He followed my suit, pressed a kiss on Kol's forehead, and we both walked it out of his room.

Both of us found ourselves in the kitchen, chest-to-chest. I had to look up to meet his gaze, locking us together. Time lagged, as it always did when I was with him. His fingers fisted my sweater and pulled my body flush with his.

I held my breath, his head slowly bent, lower and lower, until his mouth was a breath away from mine.

I waited. He waited. I wanted him. He wanted me. Yet, nothing was that simple. Not anymore. His mouth brushed against my lips, his kiss gentle and soft.

My heart fluttered. Heat bloomed beneath my skin. My chest grew heavy with that familiar consuming feeling. And all the while, he kissed me like I was something precious to him.

But if that was true, he wouldn't have cheated. The memory washed over me like a cold shower.

My palms rested against his chest and I pushed him away.

I shook my head. "No," I told him firmly. I couldn't venture down the same road and let him burn me again.

"I'm here because you blackmailed me, Alessio. But that doesn't mean, I'll let you repeat history. We can't repeat the past."

A long pause followed. The fragile hope that Branka's words flickered inside me threatened to blow out and all the while my soul shook like a leaf in a wind. There was no point in denying it. I wanted him. I always wanted him. From the moment he barged into my bedroom on my eighteenth birthday.

"I didn't cheat on you." A simple statement. The sincerity in his eyes. Honesty in the tone of his voice.

I could have believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes. It was the most damning evidence. Even if in my oblivion and stupidity I wanted to believe him, I couldn't forget what I had seen.

"I saw you, Alessandro." My tone was detached. Tired. Hurt. But the flicker of hope refused to extinguish. "Both times. And those words- "

He stilled. The pain that crossed his expression pierced my heart. And it had already been damaged by the very man who stood in front of me, battling his own scars - visible and invisible. I knew he had them. I felt them firsthand.

I turned to leave when Alessio's fingers wrapped around my wrist, holding me back.

"I'm going to tell you a story," he said bitterly, his gaze filling with something dark and sardonic. "It's not a pretty one."

His left palm, rough and big, cupped my cheek and sorrow filled his gray gaze. It was like staring at the darkening skies, just as a storm was about to break loose. I didn't like to see pain in his expression, but I knew we wouldn't be able to move past what had happened four years ago. Not unless he explained - although I couldn't even fathom what could ever justify cheating.

"My mother was young when she married my father." Bitterness filled his voice, swirling around us like the old ghosts that lurked in his eyes. Haunting him. "She was already pregnant. With another man's child." I held my breath, waiting. Unsure where this story would go. "Senator George Ashford is my biological father. Of course, he wasn't a senator back then. He was an ambitious prick, willing to destroy anyone and anything while he climbed the ladder. Even an innocent, naive, young woman."

A sharp gasp escaped me. I hadn't even realized I lowered myself down into a chair. He paced to the opposite side of the table. As if he needed distance from me. The large kitchen seemed too large yet, at the same time, too small.

Alessio let out a breath, regret lurking in his eyes. He already regretted sharing this story with me and uncertainty grew in my lungs. But I still remained, waiting. Hoping for a miracle. Or maybe for something that would cure me of this need for him.

"Anyhow, he refused to marry her or acknowledge her child. Me. So her parents scrambled to marry her off. To the man who raised me." The hate in his voice didn't escape me. Except, I couldn't tell whether it was aimed at his biological father or the man who raised him. Maybe both. "The fucker who raised me, Branka's father, was a sadistic bastard. He beat my mother for giving her virginity to someone else. He beat me for not being his son. He beat Mia and Branka for being girls instead of the boys he wanted. His favorite form of entertainment was extinguishing cigarettes on me, on them. But his hate towards me ran deeper than most."

Uncertainty slithered through my veins. I knew his father was sadistic but I had a feeling that didn't even scratch the surface.

"I was about thirteen when my father's beatings turned into something worse." I swallowed a lump in my throat as

dread grew within me. "He trafficked women. As young as he could get them. And he loved breaking them." My chest went cold as terror and fear bubbled up inside me. "The first time I dared to stand up to him, he drugged me. Rohypnol and Viagra. The next morning, I woke up naked with a girl beaten black and blue, and her thighs bloodied."

Horror swelled in my chest. The backs of my eyes burned. Alessio's eyes flared with contempt. "Don't pity me."

I couldn't say a word so I just shook my head. I didn't pity him but my heart ached for the young boy who had to suffer through it. Alone.

"It took me a while to learn never to take a drink from my father. Or any of his men." Silence stretched. I didn't dare to ask him how long was *awhile*. "There are many men like him in this world, Autumn. So I promised myself, I'd become stronger, more powerful and more ruthless than him. Eventually, I put an end to his trafficking, but there is nothing that will absolve me of those sins. Those women, virgins, I can't even remember."

Jesus Christ.

I didn't even know what to say. How to comfort him. I couldn't blame him though. He was a kid. He should have been protected.

A grimace touched his lips as he continued, "Unfortunately, I forgot the fucking lesson. I thought myself invincible. Four years ago, that sadistic bastard bribed a couple - husband and wife - to slip me the same drug."

Alessio Russo didn't cheat. He was... Jesus, he was raped. And I just left him. Oh my gosh, I could have saved him. Instead, I left him.

My face paled and I covered my mouth. Acid churned in my stomach, rising up my throat. A bitter laugh escaped him at my expression.

"Three months later, when you saw me in London," he continued, his voice tired. "I had just killed those two. But I

realized, that bastard, my father, wouldn't stop coming. And I couldn't bear the thought of him destroying your innocence. So this time I staged it so you'd hate me. Never want to see me again."

"That woman—" I rasped.

"I had no clue what her name was. I never touched her." He pushed his hand through his hair. "Because I knew I wouldn't be strong enough to stay away from you. I *needed* you to hate me and never want me again."

A soft exhale left me while tears stung my eyes. "I care, Autumn. I cared back then and I still do. So fucking much that it terrifies me."

"You do?" I whispered in shock.

"You're the first person to make me feel worthy." God, the look in his eyes was breaking my heart. I didn't like seeing him suffer. "All my broken parts somehow healed around you. For such a long time, my demons dominated my soul. They have been ripping me apart for so long that I didn't know what happy was until I experienced it with you."

I'll always love your broken parts. Your scars. Every piece of you.

My throat squeezed too hard to utter even a single word.

"I lied four years ago. I lied when I said you were just a fuck. That I didn't care. I hurt you and I'm so fucking sorry, love," he whispered. The pain on his face was gut wrenching. I didn't like to see him suffer. "I only feel alive when I'm with you. A stronger man would let you go. I'm not that strong. I can't let you go. You're my only hope for a good life. Of happiness. You and Kol." There was a sheen of moisture coating his grays. It reminded me of clouds on a rainy day. Like the sky was shedding tears that he tried to hold back. "But I won't force you to sleep in my bed anymore."

His finger came up to my cheek and he brushed a lone tear with his thumb. "You were always the best thing this

shitty life had offered me.”

Without another word, Alessio stood up and disappeared. A few moments later, I could hear his voice coming from his home office.

And the whole time I remained still, my body still in shock from hearing it all.

I failed Alessio. I should have been stronger and stayed with him. I should have protected him.

Worst of all, I kept our son a secret from him.

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CHAPTER 32

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ALESSIO



My eyes locked on the city skyline from my penthouse office and suddenly, I felt so goddamn old. The irony of my confession was that I was bound to lose her whether I admitted my shame or not. Damned if I did; damned if I didn't.

Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. Maybe I should have left her believing I betrayed what we had.

Even though we created the most beautiful boy.

Kol was mine.

That was one thing nobody could take away from me. And I'd marry Autumn. Make her my wife, but I wouldn't force her to be my wife in every sense of the word. Although I fucking wanted to. My cock ached for her. My fucking heart and soul ached for her.

I hadn't had another woman since our last time together. I didn't fucking count that day in Abu Dhabi. After the drug wore off, the old feelings of filth and unworthiness came back tenfold. It didn't matter how old I was.

The only way to heal after I lost her the last time was to go hunting. I killed the man and woman who accepted the bribe from my father. She wasn't an innocent victim of trafficking. She was some greedy bitch. And her husband even more so for even contemplating slipping the drug to Autumn.

God that expression on Autumn's face. The way her eyes turned brown and glittered. I made her sad again. I fucking hated seeing her sad. It gutted me. It was worse than a knife through my heart.

I should have known that Autumn would have witnessed what happened in Abu Dhabi. Maybe it was my fucking pride that hoped she hadn't seen it. Or maybe I expected all along that she'd realize she was so much better than me and walk away. When she left without a word, I convinced myself she didn't want me. After all, I was unworthy. I had been unworthy my whole fucking life. I just thought if I loved her enough, she'd stay.

But then three months later, it was me who ended it all.

Her parents worked so hard to keep her out of the underworld. Her mother gave it all up, and fuck if she didn't look happier. Food poisoning and all. Autumn's father saved her. Maybe the schmuck in me hoped Autumn would be my salvation.

My eyes lowered to my hands. There was no blood on them but they were stained with it, just the same.

None of it fucking mattered anymore because I lost Autumn just the same.

There'd be no salvation for me.

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CHAPTER 33

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AUTUMN



Guilt was a powerful feeling. It gnawed at you. It ate at your insides and turned you inside out.

I didn't save Alessio while he was being sexually assaulted in front of my eyes. The image from four years ago flashed in my mind, and I started analyzing every single detail.

Fuck, it hurt to think about it but I forced myself to remember every single detail. Images lived in my head. It was the reason I loved photography. It was how my memory worked. Except when it was something I didn't want to remember.

Alessio's big frame was sprawled on the marble floor of the presidential suite. His suit jacket was still on, unbuttoned. His pants pulled half down to his knees. The crisp white shirt was half ripped, a brown stain on it. Glass shattered on the floor.

I blinked. There was glass on the floor. All around him. How did I not realize it earlier?

The woman's head bobbed up and down, up and down. Acid burned in my stomach from the memory and my heart clenched in pain but I ignored it, focusing my mind on every single detail.

Alessio's hands were relaxed, sprawled down his body. He didn't grip the woman's hair. He wasn't making any noises. All the moans and grunts were hers.

Her hand cupped his balls and he moved. It was slow. Like his body was too heavy to shift.

Oh my God.

He was drugged. And all I did was dwell on self-pity. I walked away from him when I could have saved him.

I should have saved him. I wondered if he blamed me, like I blamed him. Or if I told him Kol was his son would he hate me forever? I stole the first years of our son's life from Alessio. It was wrong and cruel.

We wasted four years. I had robbed my son of his father too.

I had no idea how long I sat frozen, lost in my thoughts. Four years flashing through my eyes. Kol's first smile. First crawl. First steps. First birthday. I robbed Alessio of all of it. How could I possibly make it up to him?

Rising to my feet, I strode towards Kol's bedroom to check on him. Alessio had procured the snap on rails so he wouldn't fall off the large mahogany bed.

Until I build him a bed, he had said. Only a day around him and he'd proven he'd be a worthy father. And now, when I told him, I'd risk hurting him again. Breaking this fragile bond.

Unless he knew, I pondered. But then, he'd pounce on me. Alessio wasn't scared to fight for what was his.

My hand shook as I pushed his dark curls off his forehead. Kol slept peacefully, a dreamy smile on his lips. This should have been Alessio's childhood too.

I failed him four years ago. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was. I needed to ask him for forgiveness. He survived a nightmare and I walked away without a backwards glance. Most of all, I wanted to tell him how much I loved him. I would always love him.

Pressing a kiss onto my son's forehead and leaving the door cracked open, I left his room and went into Alessio's room.

Our bedroom.

I found him there. He must have finished his business call. He didn't look up as I opened the door. But his back tensed. Like he expected me to hurt him. Again and again.

He sat on the side of the bed with his elbows on his knees and his gaze on the floor. In nothing but black boxers. His muscles sculpted. His ink tempting. The silver moon filtered through the large floor-to-ceiling windows, but the darkness of his admission and my failure lurked in each dark corner of the room.

I waited a moment, holding my breath. I wasn't sure what I waited for, but my heartbeat thundered in my throat and my ears. The bravery that brought me here suddenly seemed to slither away.

Dad always said I tended to run into things head first. But at this very moment, hesitation kept my feet glued to my spot and tugged on my heart. I worried about messing it up. Hurting him again. Losing him again.

However, there was no turning around. No going back.

So I took steps towards him. I pulled the sweater over my head and let it fall silently onto the floor. Next step, my jeans followed.

Every inch of my body shook, the tremor in my fingers visible. It was terrifying to think the next few seconds could forever end this. End us. Four years and I had never stopped loving him. After the loathing simmered down, underneath the bitterness, love remained. The craving for him remained. Because he was *it* for me.

Just as he promised, he ruined me for anyone else.

I stopped in front of him in nothing but a bra and panties. White, his favorite. He didn't look up at me. I took another step, forcing myself between his slightly parted

legs. He didn't widen his stance to welcome me between his legs either.

Will he ever welcome me again? I wondered. *Once I told him my truth.*

My breaths came out shallow and the drumming of my heart filled the air.

I lowered myself to my knees and took his face between my hands. Our eyes met, locked into many breathless moments. Those two months were the best of my life. Sweaty bodies. Hotel sheets. Pillow fights. Only so he could catch me and fuck me again. Agonizingly slow, until I begged him to make me come.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. He let out a tense, sardonic breath. His warmth poured off him and I absorbed it. I needed strength right now. His strength. Because he was one of the bravest men I had ever known.

"Don't pity me." Three words. The lifetime of vulnerability.

"I'm sorry I didn't save you four years ago," I rasped, emotions choking me. It took all this to realize I couldn't live the rest of my life without him. "I'm sorry I thought the worst of you. I'm sorry I didn't talk it through with you. And most of all, I'm sorry I didn't kill that woman or your father."

Maybe there was some of my mobster grandparents in me after all.

My fingers laced through his soft strands, gripping a handful of it. "I love you," I murmured softly, my lips skimming over his neck. "Just the way you are. Every single piece. Broken or not. Your bad boy ruthlessness underneath that gentlemanly exterior. I love you so much that it hurts to breathe when you're not around."

Our gazes remained locked. My admission filled the air. Vulnerability lingering in his eyes matched the one in my voice. Rejection - we were both scared of it. There was nothing I wouldn't give to erase his pain.

"Alessandro?" I murmured softly.

"Yes?" His palm snaked under my panties and kneaded the flesh of my ass.

"I have a confession to make too," I whispered softly. He waited, his eyes on me. "I-I came to tell you. In London." Something dark flickered in his gaze and he searched my face. "I wanted to tell you I was pregnant." His fingers dug into my ass. "Kol is yours."

Something dark as sin filled his gaze. Possessive. Consuming.

"I know."

An incredulous breath left me. So he knew after all. "How? When?"

A half-smile pulled on his lips.

"Only yesterday. When I saw Kol at the gravesite, I called a friend," he admitted. "Kol is mine. You listed me on his birth certificate." He raised his hand to cup my cheek. "You gave him my name."

The intensity in his voice made my throat tighten. The way his hand shook told me I did something right.

"Yes. Your first name for his middle name," I breathed. "Alessandra is Maman's name so I figured if anyone questioned it, I'd blame her for it." His lips tugged up, tempting me to kiss him. "We can change his last name. Anything you want." His heat and familiar scent wrapped around me like a blanket. "I'm sorry I kept it from you."

"I'm sorry for hurting you, love."

Tears blurred my vision. So much time wasted. "Ditto."

"Tell me about Kol's scar."

As always, terror squeezed my chest. The man was dead. Six feet under. But the memory still terrified me.

"Your father showed up at the hospital the day he was born," I croaked, that old familiar fear in my chest. "He threatened me. He pushed a cigarette butt into Kol. I fought him, but I was too weak after giving birth. He only

stopped when I threatened him by using the Corsican mafia."

He pushed his face into my lower belly. His mouth skimmed over the soft cloth, like he wanted to kiss all the pain away.

"I gave you up and still you ended up hurt." His voice was rough. Full of pain and regret. "I failed you and Kol."

I shook my head.

"No, I failed you," I claimed. "I don't want us to live in the past anymore. We have each other now. We start over. Focus on our present. Our future. The three of us. My parents. Branka. A family."

He leaned closer and his nose touched mine, his mouth was a breath away from mine.

"I love you, Alessandro." A rough sound rumbled in his chest. "I don't want to waste any more time."

"You have no idea how long I've waited to hear those words." His admission warmed my chest. His forehead came to mine and his eyes bore into me, conveying so much but he said nothing else.

"Make love to me," I murmured. "Please."

The words were out before I realized it. Not that I wanted to take them back. It was never making love for us. It was hunger, craving, ripping clothes off. I wasn't sure what making love was. But maybe we could learn. Together.

"If I make love to you, Autumn, there'll be no going back. I'll be the last man ever to touch you. The last man to feel your pussy. The last man to feel your lips, your skin." His grip tightened. "You'll belong to me. Every single piece of you will be mine. I gave you up once. I won't do it again."

Ba-boom. Ba-boom. Ba-boom.

It wasn't a declaration of love. But it was a start. Four years ago, he warned me he didn't make love. The fact that he was willing to try spoke volumes.

"You can have all of me." He deserved it. I wanted to give it to him, because it was all I ever wanted. "On one

condition," I added.

"I want the same from you," I rasped. "I'll be the last woman to touch you, kiss you, feel your nice bad boy ass." His smile just about stole my breath away. "I'm all yours and you're all mine."

Before I could even blink, he had me flipped on my back against the mattress.

"Alessandro," I squealed.

His mouth pressed against my lips before another word could come out. His kisses burned a path down my neck.

Rough. Bruising. Consuming.

"There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Autumn." My heart was beating so hard, I feared it would explode. "You and Kol. The three of us."

"I love you," I whispered.

His hand slid over my hip, then his finger hooked on my panties. "I love white on you."

Heat consumed every inch of my skin. My bra followed.

"I want you to buy me new panties," I murmured, my mouth searching for his. Urgent. Wet. My tongue met his and I moaned with need. My hips ground against him, mirroring every thrust and glide of our tongues.

It was all he needed. I barely had time to blink. His boxers were off before he pushed inside me in one powerful thrust, filling me to the hilt. I moaned, he groaned.

I had forgotten how big he was. We were both shaking with the intensity of it.

"Home," he hissed against my neck. My palms pressed against his spine and a shudder rolled down his back. "I'm finally home."

My pulse thrummed between my legs. He sucked on my tongue as he eased out and then back inside. Pleasure burned through my bloodstream and I knew I wouldn't last long. Four years without his touch, I'd probably burst any moment.

"God, it feels so good," I breathed. Both of us lowered our eyes and watched his length disappear in and out of me.

"I won't be able to go easy," he rasped.

"C-condom... we need a condom," I moaned as he pushed inside me.

"I'm clean."

"Same," I breathed, my eyes rolling in the back of my head. "T-that's not... Oh, God." He thrust deep inside me. I could feel him stretching me, hitting my spot. "We need to be responsible."

"I want more kids." Another thrust. Hard and deep. Our heavy breaths filled the space between us. "You?"

His question should scare me; it didn't.

"Whatever you want. Just please, I need more." His eyes came up to mine. Molten silver. "Please, Alessandro. I need you."

He didn't need any more encouragement. He fucked me deep and hard. My body remembered him. His body remembered mine. My arms wrapped around him, my legs hooked around his hips, and I held on.

Each thrust sent pleasure through me. The wave of heat curled in the pit of my stomach. My eyes rolled into the back of my head.

His hand came to my throat and my neck pushed into his big palm.

"Mine," he grunted. "All mine."

A shudder rolled through me. My breasts brushed against his chest. My legs wrapped around him. His pelvis grinding against my clit. It was hot. Erotic. Fast.

His mouth came down on mine, kissing me. His hand was still on my neck. He groaned each time, the look of crazed possession in his eyes.

"This pussy is mine," he rasped. "These tits. This body. All fucking mine."

"Yes. Yes. Yes," I screamed mindlessly as pleasure sent an inferno blazing through me. The orgasm hit me hard and stars swam in my vision. My nails scraped down his back as I held onto him, violent shudders rolling down my body.

"Fuck, love," he groaned, spurts of cum erupting from his throbbing cock. My core tingled, my orgasm roared, my body spent. His strokes eased, but he kept moving.

He trapped my bottom lip between his teeth and bit. Hard. Then soothed the sting with his tongue. As if he wanted to punish me and reward me at the same time.

With my legs still wrapped around his waist, I placed a kiss on his neck, soaking up his smell. My lips skimmed over his hot skin, tasting it.

"That was not lovemaking," I murmured against his skin. "We'll have to do it again."

Rough noise sounded in his chest. It sounded almost like a chuckle. I lifted my head to meet his eyes and they shone like stars. My heart raced, my ears buzzed.

"Don't write me off yet," he murmured against my lips. "We'll try again, I just need a few minutes to recover."

I buried my head into his neck and he turned us over so he laid down, pulling me over so my head laid against his chest. I listened to his heart beat hard and fast. For me. Just as mine beat for him. Only for him.

Slowly the room came into focus. Our labored breathing eased. His fingers played with my hair. Our hearts beat together. My hands roamed his chest, my fingers pausing over the scars hidden by the ink.

"How old were you when he did this?"

His movement stilled for a second before resuming twirling a strand of my hair around his finger.

"The earliest one I remember was when I was four, but I had scars from earlier." My heart caught in my throat. Jesus Christ.

I shifted and pressed my mouth against it. "D-didn't your mom fight him?"

A sardonic breath with a hint of bitterness left him. "No. She was terrified of him. She let him do whatever he wanted to me, Mia, and Branka."

"Branka doesn't talk much about Mia," I noted softly. "Were you close with her?"

"Yes." It was only a single word but raw pain vibrated through its syllable. "She was five years younger than me." My palm roamed his chest in a circular motion. "I couldn't protect her. The only thing I could do was irritate him more so his anger would be more focused on me. He blamed her for being a girl. Liked to humiliate her, make her walk in front of his men naked, showing them the burn marks she earned by disobedience."

"God," I whispered. "I knew he was cruel but that is sadistic."

"Your mother should have taken you and ran," I murmured. "Or shot him."

He let out a sarcastic breath. "The only time our mother was brave enough to do something was when I was fifteen," he said. I had a bad feeling. "She tried to set us all on fire in her room. Branka was only an infant."

My heart froze. I couldn't fathom a mother hurting her own children. "Is that how Mia died?"

"No, she survived. We all did. But Mother never forgave me for getting us out. Every scream, every pain that Branka and Mia endured from then on was my fault."

I shot up, my palms on his warm chest. "It's not your fault," I croaked. "You saved their lives. Look at Branka. She's strong and brave. And a total badass if I may say. All thanks to you."

He reached to the nightstand and lit a cigarette.

"Some days I wondered. Mia was so ashamed of her body, but she refused to let Father break her," he continued, lost in the past. "The moment she turned eighteen, I helped her get to the U.S. and join the military."

Once she was accepted, he couldn't get her out. You want to know the ultimate irony?"

I wasn't sure that I did, but I nodded anyhow. He had never confided in me like this before.

"She committed suicide." A soft gasp sounded from my lips. "A group of assholes raped her and she just snapped. Couldn't come back from it."

"God, Alessio," I murmured softly, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "I'm so sorry. So damn sorry." He had so much tragedy in his life.

"At Mia's funeral, I beat my father black and blue, then took Branka to live with me. I swore at least one of us in this wretched family would have some semblance of normalcy."

It made me admire him even more. He took his responsibility seriously. I pressed my cheek against his warm chest and kissed his sculpted abs. His scent was all over me and around me. The scent of sandalwood, spice and smoke. Familiar and intimate.

"Are you smoking a lot?" I asked for no reason.

"I'll quit."

I raised my head off his chest. "You will?"

He nodded. "It's not good for the baby. Or you."

My lips curved into a soft smile. "Nor you." I shifted and pressed my mouth against his. I'd never get enough of him.

"I love you."

His hand grabbed my nape and he nipped my bottom lip. "Don't you ever stop, Autumn. There isn't much that can kill me but you... you can." His last words came out rough, but the look in his eyes said it all.

"Ditto," I murmured. Another kiss. Wet. Possessive. So fucking right.

"Forget the contract and the blackmail," he rasped against my mouth. "Marry me because you want to."

We still had a lot of things to resolve. My own parents worked at their relationship every day. So would we. A lot

of ghosts to bury and wounds to heal. But we'd do them together. I finally had him back. I missed him with an ache for the past four years.

"Yes," I murmured, burying my face into his neck. He smelled so good, like warmth and spice. And home. "There is no need to rush it though. And nothing big. Leave the big wedding to Branka."

"Anything you want." His lips moved over my head. "She told you, huh?"

"Yeah."

"She fought it for years. Not sure what made her suddenly change her mind."

That was definitely not my story to tell Alessio.

"I'm not sure if arranged marriages are smart," I muttered. "She should marry for love."

"More than anything, she needs protection," he retorted dryly. "Our father managed to make many enemies."

I tensed. "What about you?"

"I have many enemies too." I flicked him a worried look. "I'll protect you and Kol. Always."

I didn't doubt him. I always felt safe with him, but it didn't mean I agreed with his illegitimate business.

"Would you have many enemies if you were just an average businessman?" I asked hesitantly.

"Probably."

I shook my head. "Probably?"

"I inherited all my father's enemies. Add to it that I ended the human trafficking in our territory and earned myself some more because I hurt their business."

"So you can't get out?"

"If I get out, there would be someone taking over the territory and possibly reinstating human trafficking. My friends and I have worked hard and sacrificed a lot to end it. I can't just throw it away."

"But gun and drug dealings- " He tensed and uncertainty flickered through me. I didn't want to ruin this

moment so I switched subjects. "So do we know when Branka's wedding will be?" I asked and he nodded. "Who's the lucky groom?"

"Killian Brennan."

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CHAPTER 34

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ALESSIO



Autumn slept tucked beneath the covers, one smooth thigh outside the covers and her bare ass tempting me. Her brows were drawn as she slept on her side, facing the window. I smoothed a hand over her brow and she leaned into my touch.

She was beautiful.

I still couldn't believe she was here. With me.

She came to me willingly. Eight years of waiting and sacrifice led us here. I'd do it all over again - if it meant her and Kol's safety.

She was my first and last love. My only one. Without her, I was just existing. With her, I was living.

I watched her sleeping until the flicker of dawn began to temper the darkness in our bedroom. I itched to wake her and lose myself in her again. I shouldn't. I've taken her several times already tonight.

She had the most perfect ass, begging me to bite it. My dick hardened and I couldn't resist the temptation.

I laid my hand on her thigh, then dipped it between her legs. She opened her legs in invitation and the moment my fingers brushed against her clit, a soft whimper filled the air. She was drenched already.

My mouth traveled down her soft body, her skin smelling just as I remembered it. Fall. Apple. So fucking tasty. I

flattened my tongue against her clit, then licked her. Slow, savoring her juices.

"Oh my God."

Autumn's moan vibrated through the darkness of our bedroom. Her fingers gripped my hair, her legs hiked over my shoulders as she ground her pussy against my mouth. I licked her clit like it was the last taste of heaven.

Her fingers tightened. "Please, please don't stop."

"I just got started, love," I drawled, then gave her clit another languorous lick. Her thighs shuddered, squeezing around my head. I sucked her swollen bud into my mouth and another breathless moan followed.

I felt her shiver and her pussy was dripping wet. For me. I loved eating her pussy. I loved her scent. I loved tasting her. I watched her face as I pushed a finger into her entrance and she screamed with pleasure.

"Want my tongue inside your pussy?" Her answer was a whimper. I gently slapped her pussy and her eyes snapped open. "Words," I growled.

"Yes."

"Yes what?" I egged her on. Fuck, that flush on her cheeks was so attractive. There wasn't a single thing I didn't find perfect when it came to her.

"I want your tongue in my pussy," she breathed on a moan.

I grinned. "That's my girl."

The moment my tongue touched her pussy she bucked again and her eyes grew half-lidded. I always loved watching her when eating her pussy. That blissful look on her face was the best fucking sight. I started fucking her with my tongue. Harder and faster. Just the way she liked it.

"You taste like I remember," I rasped against her. "So fucking good."

I couldn't get enough of that taste that was uniquely her. She ground against my mouth, her muscles taut and her

whimpers getting louder and louder. I'd never have enough of her. I pushed my tongue deeper into her, then out. In and out. I could feel her pussy clenching, greedy for more.

I nipped her clit, then pushed my fingers in hard. She was so fucking tight, her walls clenching around my fingers.

"Oh my God, Alessandro," she cried. "I- I'm gonna... "

I pushed my fingers back in until I was knuckles deep inside her. "That's right, love. Let it go."

A shudder rolled through her, her eyes on me, watching me full of lust as I lowered my head again and ate her up, savoring her. Her back bowed off the bed as she cried out my name, her fingers fisting in my hair.

Her whole body vibrated with the force of her orgasm. I rose and made my way up her body, taking her mouth. Letting her taste herself on my tongue.

Then in one thrust, I pushed deep inside her. Her loud moan traveled up my spine, and I started thrusting into her, faster and faster, until the only sounds were our ragged breathing. Flesh slapping against flesh. She was my heaven. I fucked her so rough and hard, I feared I'd break her. Bruise her.

"Don't fucking stop," she moaned with a tiny growl. Even if I wanted to stop, I wouldn't be able to. And I didn't want to stop fucking her. I watched her pleasure glazed eyes, her mouth urging me to go faster and deeper.

She shattered as another orgasm slammed into her, her pussy clenching me tightly until I came apart, spurting my cum into her pussy. I shuddered against her, kissing her mouth, her nose, her forehead.

Fuck, I hoped she'd get pregnant so she'd wed me sooner.

As I came down, I found Autumn's lips curved into a soft smile. "That was love making, right?"

I dropped my forehead to hers. "Yes, it was."

Her smile turned wider, but her eyes fluttered shut. "I knew it."

A soft snore sounded and amusement filled me. Maybe I shouldn't have woken her. I'd been keeping her awake late into the night most days tasting every inch of her. She'd start touching me. I'd start touching her. It was as if we tried to make up for the last four years.

I pulled her closer to me and she curled into me, murmuring something unintelligible.

Seven days.

It had been seven days since Autumn and Kol became part of my household.

I watched the woman who'd filled my every waking thought for the past four years sleep in my arms, and I still couldn't believe she was with me. We hadn't talked about the blackmail anymore. She agreed to marry me but asked not to rush it.

Now that I was so close to having her, I worried about losing her. The itch to force her to take my name still clawed at me, but I ignored it. I'd wait for her to set the date. I wanted to go about it right.

For her. For our son.

The sun hadn't risen yet, but years of insomnia were hard to break. I rose out of bed and strode to the window. I watched her sleep as I lit up a cigarette. The habit had grown worse since she walked away four years ago.

The need for the smoke had diminished since she'd been back. She seemed to be the only cure I needed. She and Kol. When we were together, I forgot about the fucked up past. With her, I had a family.

Branka, Autumn, Kol, and I. Although, I couldn't quite get a read on my sister. Something troubled her. She wasn't happy about this wedding arrangement, but her lack of protest puzzled me. I couldn't quite figure it out.

Slowly the sun rose and cast its rays over Autumn in my bed. It still seemed surreal. Autumn Corbin slept in my bed.

Willingly. The sheet came up to her waist and the rays radiated over her smooth, creamy skin. That gorgeous jet-black hair sprawled out on the pillow and the sun reflected in that too.

After four years of restlessness and rage, I finally found peace. And fuck it, I was scared to lose it. Lose her because now I knew how life without her would be.

Bleak. Pointless.

But my lifestyle still stood between us. She was saving the world; I was corrupting it. We'd need to come clean on our path forward sooner or later.

Extinguishing the half smoked cigarette, I headed for the kitchen to fix breakfast. Little Kol loved scrambled eggs. The best part of my day were mornings when we all sat around together eating breakfast and nights when I buried myself inside my woman.

I started with the coffee maker. My lips curved up into a smile remembering how cranky Autumn got yesterday before she had her coffee. She was a coffee addict alright.

I started the bean grinder when a pair of soft hands wrapped around my waist from behind and that unique scent enveloped me. Her touch always sent a small shudder through my spine. I fucking lived for her touch.

I turned around and she pressed her face into my chest.

"A sexy guy without a shirt fixing me coffee," she murmured into my chest, inhaling deeply. "It's a dream come true."

A smile touched my lips. "I live to serve you."

A blush rose to her cheeks. God there was so much I wanted from her. Her smiles. Her happiness. More children. I wanted everything from her. But her reluctance to set the date fucked with me.

Maybe I wasn't good enough. What I felt for her was so fucking deep, part of each breath and heartbeat that sometimes I worried I wouldn't function without her. The

only thing that kept me going over the last four years was bits and pieces of information Branka fed me.

Pathetic, I know.

Yes, I could have had Nico provide me with a daily detailed report on her but I didn't. I thought it was best for her that I let her go. Until I learned what my father had done. To our son. I should have been there to protect her.

Bottom line, I was all in.

Although I wondered what Autumn would do if she knew how far my obsession went. From the moment I laid eyes on her eight years ago in her bedroom while the birthday party below us was in full swing.

She was too independent. Too normal. Maybe it was exactly that which drew me to her. She repaired all my broken, cracked parts with just her touch or a smile. She was my cure. My healing started when I met her.

"A few of my friends are coming up," I told her. "Can your parents watch Kol so you can come along? We'll pick him up on our way back from the restaurant."

Her hazel eyes met mine. "Wouldn't they rather just see you?" she asked.

I shook my head. "You are part of me."

She studied me. "Don't men usually prefer to hang out without women around?"

I smiled. "I don't. Neither do my friends." When you've gone through life without something and you finally found it, there was no letting go. Autumn was that for me. Áine was that for Cassio. Aurora, my half-sister, was that for Alexei. "Their wives will be there."

"What should I wear?" she asked.

My eyes roamed down her body. She wore one of my long-sleeve shirts. The collar was slipping off her shoulder, and she had the sleeves rolled up her forearms. She looked perfect. And mine.

She rose to her tiptoes, brushed her tongue against the corner of my mouth, and breathed against my lips. "I really

like when you look at me. Like I'm the best sight you have ever seen."

Satisfaction ran hot through my veins. "You *are* the best sight I have ever seen."

The only sight I wanted to see for the rest of my life.
Her and our children.

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CHAPTER 35

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AUTUMN



Alessio and I had fallen into a routine.

He'd fix breakfast. When Kol woke up, we'd eat it together. Then we'd tag team getting ready and we'd escort him to work, while Kol and I would go visit my parents. Or meet up with Branka.

Today was no exception.

After breakfast, the three of us slid into his car, Kol safely secured in the car seat between us. The moment Alessio shot the partition between his driver and us, I turned to face him.

"What time should I be ready for dinner?" I asked him, bringing back our original topic.

"I'll be home by five."

Home. I came to think of the penthouse as home. Alessio and Kol were my home.

I pulled out my phone and typed a quick message to my parents.

The reply was instant.

"We're all set," I told him smiling.

Alessio leaned over the car seat and I met him halfway, our mouths connecting. A soft, fleeting kiss. Yet, it rattled my soul unlike anything else before. Alessio's arms rested behind our son's car seat and reached behind me. His palm rested on my shoulders and his fingers played with my hair.

Twisting it and untwisting it around his finger. And I enjoyed a small tingle that coursed through me as his driver drove us across town to my parents.

"Do you have to work today?" I murmured. "We could do something fun."

His mouth curved. "Like what?"

I grinned. "I'm sure we could find something."

My cheeks heated at the insinuation in my words. And I got confirmation of my blush when his thumb brushed over it.

"I have to fly to Philly this morning, but tomorrow, I'm all yours."

"Promise."

"Cross my heart, love," I vowed. "How about we have your parents come to my estate? You can decide what room should be Kol's. And the materials are being delivered today so I can build Kol the bed I promised him."

Kol started flopping his legs and arms excitedly. "Airplane bed."

"It's a date," I beamed. "The three of us tomorrow all day."

I WOULDN'T EXACTLY SAY I was nervous.

I wasn't. But I did wish Branka was coming with us. She'd join us later with her man. Killian Brennan.

It sounded Irish, but what the fuck did I know?

I wore a red strapless cocktail dress that accentuated my curves. My hair fell down my back in soft curls and I even did my eyes with smoky eye shadow.

The moment Alessio saw me, the awed expression in his eyes told me he liked it.

His next words confirmed it. "Tell me you have red panties underneath that dress."

He held Kol with his right arm so I took his left. "You're gonna have to find out," I told him playfully.

It took no time to get across town and leave Kol safely with my parents. It didn't escape me that Alessio's men lurked on each corner.

When we slid back into his Land Rover, I asked him casually, "Are your men always here?"

"Yes."

I let out a small sigh but I said nothing else. My father probably noticed them. There was little that escaped him or Maman. Force of habit and years of practice. But if they didn't complain, then neither would I.

The moment Alessio and I entered the large restaurant, the room quieted. The restaurant was decorated in gold and red and it had a festive motif. On the far right wall, a long glass bar stretched with a variety of drinks and a bartender ready to serve. In the center of the wall, there was a large television muted but the captions were too hard to see.

My eyes traveled over the room full of mobsters and their wives. They closed the entire restaurant to the public.

Alessio's hand came around my waist and pulled me closer. It was all the assurance I needed. I knew he got me.

Cassio and Áine, along with Luciano and his wife, came up first.

"Nice to see you again," Grace greeted me.

"Yes, long time no see," Áine remarked teasingly. "It was only in June that we saw you. Seems so long ago." They both seemed really happy to see me.

"Hi again, Autumn," Luciano added. "Hopefully, you're happier to see us this time. At least us, Cassio can still be on your shit list," he elaborated, referring to the exhibition we met at.

"Luciano, Grace." Alessio greeted them. He stood taller than Luciano but something about the latter's tattoos made him look outright scary. Not that I thought Alessio was any

less ruthless. He hid it under his polished gentleman's exterior. "How is little Matteo?"

"He's doing great," Grace beamed. "We'll have to bring him up next time."

"Agreed. Matteo and Kol are close in age, they'd play well together. Of course, Kol speaks more French and Matteo Italian but they'll figure it out."

A round of chuckles followed.

Another couple approached, and it took all I had not to shrink back. Arctic cold blue eyes. Emotionless face. And next to him a woman with dark hair smiling like the whole world was just right.

"Hi there," she greeted me, extending her hand. "You must be Autumn." I nodded, my eyes darting back to her date. I didn't trust him not to kill me before I blinked. "This is my husband, Alexei. I'm Aurora, his wife."

I swallowed, flicking a gaze to Alessio. He didn't seem worried.

Okay, then. Neither was I. Maybe?

The last name registered. Nikolaev!

"Are you related to Sasha Nikolaev?" I blurted out.

Alessio's eyebrow shot up in surprise.

"Brother," Alessio answered. Raspy voice. Cold voice. Jesus, he was fucking scary.

"Oh, look at that. You remember me." A tall, stalky three-piece-suit strode over to us. A shark-like grin on his face and a slightly unhinged look in his eyes that darted behind me. Like he was expecting someone. "I must have left a lasting impression."

And the memory slammed into me. I remembered him. Four years ago, we sat in the restaurant with him and his brother.

Sasha Nikolaev. This was the guy who broke Branka's heart?

Holy fucking shit! Branka needed her eyes checked. Did she not see he was a scary motherfucker?

She'd need help carving his heart out. Or killing him. I'd help her. I was a peace loving, kind-hearted girl but this guy... Yeah, I'd make an exception because I wanted my best friend to live. My son needed an aunt.

I shot him a glare. It had to catch him by surprise because his eyebrows shot up.

"Not that lasting," I mumbled. "Not unless you count people you never wanted to see again as a lasting impression."

His inked fingers slipped into his pockets and he took another step towards me. "Where is your sister, Russo?" Sasha asked Alessio, but his eyes remained on me.

"Running late, as usual," Alessio retorted dryly. "She'd never miss hanging out with Autumn. Those two are inseparable."

"That's so sweet," a soft voice exclaimed. Another Nikolaev. It was fucking hard to miss them with those tall frames and freaky pale blue eyes. A towering man came up with a petite woman in his arms. I had met him before too. They were like night and day. Scary face and smiling face. Storm and sunshine. "Hello, I'm Isabella. Vasili's wife."

"Hmmm." The age disparity between the two seemed even bigger than Alessio's and mine. In fact, all of them seemed to have much younger wives. I guess when I married Alessio, I wouldn't be the younger one. *When*, I thought dreamily. I'd have to talk to him about setting a date. "Nice to meet you. I met your husband briefly a few years back," I responded. You could see it all over Isabella, she was a sweetheart.

"How is Tatiana?" Alessio asked, leaving me to wonder who Tatiana was.

"She needs time to heal," Isabella answered. "She's upset."

"Tatiana needs to kick some ass," Sasha grumbled. "And she'll get over it all."

"Tatiana and you need to be separated," Vasili snapped. "The two of you together will start a goddamn war."

Isabella patted her husband's giant hand in an attempt to calm him down.

"Autumn, meet Nico and his wife Bianca," Alessio continued the introductions, while Sasha and Vasili started bickering in Russian. "And you remember Byron."

The half-brother.

"Hello, Autumn," he greeted me. "And before you ask, no I didn't speak with Senator Ashford."

"Well, a girl can hope," I muttered. "Although I'd strongly suggest you or someone give that man an education on weapons trade agreements and humanitarian activities in the world. He's fucking clueless."

"I like her." My head whipped in the direction of the rough, cold voice. It belonged to Alexei. Hopefully, it was a good thing to be liked by Alexei. Or maybe not. His wife grinned.

"Yeah, me too," she added. She leaned over and kissed Alessio on the cheek. "Good choice, brother." I frowned. Did she just call him *brother*? She noticed my confused look. "Byron is my brother."

"Oh." I tilted my head, studying her. "Does Branka know?"

Aurora's eyes darted to Alessio and mine followed. He shook his head. "You have to tell her," I murmured. I turned my head back to Aurora. "So it's just you and your brother—"

"No, I have another half-sister. Alessio and Byron, of course. And three other brothers." Wow, that was a big family. "How about you?"

"Umm, just me. And Branka," I answered. "My parents say that is like having ten kids."

A soft chuckle traveled through the room. "My father used to say the same thing," Bianca, Nico's wife, chimed in. "Sometimes I wonder what he'd say if he saw our twins." A

soft smile curved her lips. I could relate to that smile. It was the very same one I felt every time I talked about Kol.

Everyone's eyes remained on me, studying me curiously. But to their credit, they didn't ask any questions. We all sat around a large set table, with only two spots still vacant. They belonged to Branka and Killian who I had yet to meet.

The meal was served and I quite enjoyed it. Alessio sat next to me talking to the men, his hand on my thigh. Isabella and Bianca discussed recipes. From the sound of it, Isabella was bad at cooking.

"She's better at saving lives than cooking," Aurora commented. "She's a doctor."

"Oh." I flicked a glance Isabella's way. She was writing notes with a furrowed brow, muttering it was easier to cut up a human than cut up a chicken. It was almost comical. "I hear your photographs are sought after."

"Oh, they are," Grace and Áine chimed in at the same time. "I barely snatched one," Áine added. "Alessio bought out the whole gallery."

"What?" I blurted out.

Áine and Grace shared a smile. "Yes, he was the prick," Grace teased in a hushed tone. "I was so pissed off. I wanted a few of those photographs. But Alessio has to be an obsessive prick. Cassio said he hid them all in his manor."

A chuckle traveled over our side of the table. "I wonder where he has them," I muttered. "I haven't seen them in his penthouse."

"He's probably hiding them until he's certain you won't run away," Áine chimed, tilting her chin to the men. "All of them are obsessive and possessive."

I flicked a glance at the men, then back to the women. "I guess I can see that," I remarked softly. Although I didn't mind it. Not with Alessio. I loved his dark side. I loved his possessive side. I loved everything about him.

"I'm going to have to look into those," Aurora said. "Alexei has a penthouse in D.C. and it's so bland, basic. I want to make it more homey so when we visit, it doesn't feel like we're in a hotel."

My lips curved up. "Not exactly sure you'll want my kind of photos."

"Why not?"

"Most of them are more... ummm- " I searched for the right words, but failed. "Some are to raise awareness. Others are a bit dark. There are a few photos of some of the amazing places on this planet I've been able to visit."

Aurora's eyes lit up.

"I'd like to see all of them."

Grace dug out her phone and started flipping through her photos. "I snapped pictures during the exhibit in New York. She has some on her website, too."

I didn't need to look through them. I knew them all. I never forgot a single photograph I took. All the women looked at Grace's phone and my attention wandered.

My eyes lifted up to the television that showed the news and I stiffened. The chaos in Afghanistan played out across the screen. I spotted a face or two of friends I'd made. I shot up to my feet and found myself in front of the television.

"Can you turn up the volume?" I asked the bartender.

No sooner than he had, my phone, still back at the table, started ringing. I ignored it. It rang again. And again.

Áine brought it over to me. "It could be important."

"Thank you." I smiled gratefully, then answered the call. "Are you seeing it?" It was Loren.

"Yeah."

"Do you want in?"

"Yeah."

"If we do this, we're on our own," Loren grumbled. "The editor doesn't want to approve it."

I frowned. The screaming. People. Children. Crying.

"Why not?"

"It came from above." I shook my head. Someone always had an agenda. It couldn't just be simple - report, snap the pictures, and make a difference.

"Okay, let me know." I ended the call, my eyes glued on the television.

Goddamn it, humans could be so damn cruel. I didn't care what race, continent, language they spoke - it was always the innocent ones that paid the price.

"Is everything okay?" Alessio came up behind me, wrapping his hands around me.

"Yeah, the crew wants to go in," I muttered, keeping my eyes on the screen. "But they won't get the clearance to go."

I thought he let out a relieved breath, but Nico took my attention. "Probably for the best. Shit will turn nasty there."

"It doesn't mean that it shouldn't be reported on."

Nico tilted his chin to it. "It's being reported on."

I narrowed my eyes on him. "No, it's not. Look at it." My hand shot out towards the television. "It's reporting only the area around the airport. What about the whole goddamn country? The innocent people that will be left at the mercy of the dictators. The boys they'll put in to fight."

"That's one way to get your hands on a weapon," Sasha remarked. My fingers curled into my palms and I fought the urge to smack him, right across his face. His hands shot up. "I'm joking."

"Are you?" I snapped. "Do you know what happens to boys that get their hands on those weapons? They are usually dead before they even reach adulthood."

"We better hope none of our guns make it to that general area," Sasha grumbled. "Alessio's woman might kill us."

"Your guns?" I hissed. "You think you control where your illegal guns go?"

"We always check our buyers." Vasili came to his brother's defense.

I scoffed. "What? You have them sign an NDA? A resellers agreement?" I took a step towards Vasili, my finger pointing at his chest. "Admit it. You have absolutely no control where your guns go. They go to desperate countries like that. To the highest bidder." I flicked my chin towards the television. "To little boys' hands. Or adult criminals. I don't know which is worse."

My anger rose with each second, so many words bubbling inside me. "Next time you sell a gun, Mr. Nikolaev, imagine your own child holding it." Vasili growled, his whole expression darkening. "Yeah, you don't like that, do you? Well, neither do the parents of those boys," I said, pointing over my shoulder, back to the TV.

"Jesus, this girl is worse than the tree huggers," Sasha muttered. "She's going to save the world."

"Sasha-" Vasili and Alessio uttered at the same time, but I was so far gone, I couldn't hold my tongue back.

I took a threatening step towards the scary tattooed man who watched me like I was an annoying fly on the wall.

"One day, Sasha Nikolaev," I shoved my hand against his chest but the guy was like a pile of big rocks, " - someone's going to stab that black heart of yours," I told him, reining in my anger. "And I'm going to have a front row seat to it. And fucking popcorn."

I almost let it slip that Branka would carve her initials into his heart. And fuck it, I will definitely help her. Two heads were better than one.

"Are we still talking about gun distributions or something else?" Luciano grumbled. "I feel like something else is cooking."

"Well, we know Isabella's not cooking," Sasha drawled, blowing a kiss to his sister-in-law who just flipped him the bird. Then his eyes returned to me, those pale blues making me want to squirm.

"I really like the girl, Alessio," Alexei deadpanned and I waved my hands exasperated.

"Thanks," I smiled sweetly. Poor Alessio, I probably threw him off. I returned my attention to the troublemaker. "Sasha, get some coaching from your brother. Because you're a major ass," I grumbled, seeing there was no point in arguing. Besides, I didn't want anyone speculating.

"Where is your reinforcement, Autumn?" Sasha drawled lazily. "Did she leave you, the girl who wants to save the world, all alone for the wolves to eat?"

Truly. A. Dick. Donkey ass.

I couldn't think of another adequate name for him. But then I saw it. Restlessness behind that pale gaze. The constant way his eyes flickered to the entrance. I glanced around me, but men were discussing their gun distributions, Alessio's hand still at the small of my back, and women were muttering something among each other.

Returning my attention to Sasha, my lips curved into a smug smile. Not so fast, Sasha-boy. Okay, maybe not a boy. Sasha-man? Sasha-asshole? Yeah, whatever.

I took a small step forward and lowered my voice.

"Actually, Branka and her *boyfriend* are spending some time alone." The murderous expression that flashed on Sasha's face would have me shitting my pants if Alessio's hand wasn't protectively around me. Thankfully, it was. "They are getting *acquainted*," I added sweetly.

I didn't say she planned on joining us soon. But it did cause Sasha to storm out of there.

"What happened?" Vasili asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

I blinked innocently, keeping my expression blank. "No idea. I said I'd carve his heart out and he got upset."

Snickers traveled across the room.

But I didn't fool the Nikolaev brothers. Both of them kept an eye on me for the rest of the night.

Too bad they got it all wrong.

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CHAPTER 36

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AUTUMN



The dinner was actually a lot of fun once Branka got there.

I finally got to meet Killian Brennan, and he was a freaking hottie. With a capital H. Oh my gosh, those eyes. That hair. That tan. If I wasn't so smitten with Alessio, I would have drooled.

Then Branka brought up our travel pictures. And videos.

The one where we danced in Paris, including my mother, to Katy Perry's song about kissing a girl.

The whole table laughed. "Oh, that's nothing," Branka grinned, ready to dish more dirt out. I knew exactly what was coming.

"Don't do it," I warned her.

"Ah, now I want to do it even more," she beamed.

"We want to see it," Áine announced. "You two would be trouble if you teamed up with my cousin, Margaret."

I shook my head. "I don't know if that's good. Let's say, Paris won't welcome us again." The table chuckled, even the two Nikolaev men. "Where does your cousin live? Please don't say Paris."

She laughed. "She's currently in Ireland."

Branka and I shared a glance. "We haven't done anything embarrassing there, yet."

She threw her head back and laughed. "Maman threatened she won't travel with us anymore."

I shrugged, a mischievous smile on my face. "Well, we won't tell her our plans. Dancing in the middle of Dublin sounds charming."

"We can get people to throw some money in a hat for us. We'll be like traveling gypsies."

Alessio grumbled. "No traveling gypsies in this family," he warned.

"Too late," we both said at the same time and burst into giggles.

"Okay, here is Maman's favorite song," Branka announced, connecting her phone to the television projecting her video clip.

The end of Katy Perry's song showed Maman, Branka, and me dancing. Kol was still a baby, in my arms.

"Look at Kol," Branka mused. "That look right there. He still has it. That 'oh, shit, where the hell did I end up' look. Poor kid realized early on he ended up with crazy women in his family."

Kol's eyes were wide watching Maman dancing who kept trying to drag dad into the dance circle. He was recording so it'd jerk the camera every time.

"Your mom seems to love Paris," Aurora remarked.

My eyes were glued to the screen. Every so often I'd get a glimpse of dad. We were all happy. Yes, my heart was broken. And yes, it seems maybe Branka's was too. But we all had each other and my parents.

"Yeah, she said Paris will always have a special place in her heart," I answered, my eyes still glued to the screen. God, that love on my mother's face. The very same one I could see on dad's face when the camera would accidentally flick to him. He called himself an expert cameraman. "She convinced Dad she'd follow wherever he went."

The song switched over to “Die For Me,” and the very moment it started playing Branka and I shared a glance.

“I know that look,” Alessio noted. “Trouble.”

“Us? Never!” Branka and I answered.

Maman’s confused look on the screen was unmistakable. Her lips moved but you couldn’t hear her voice because Branka turned the music up to the max. Then both of us screamed the words while Maman chased us.

“Don’t say bad words,” she warned. Okay, she screamed while glancing around frantically. “The French already don’t like Americans.”

Branka and I sang our hearts out that day. Now I wondered if she was singing it for Sasha. Or was it only recently that she realized he was lying to her.

“We’re not Americans.” We both rapped our comment like it was part of the song.

“Mon Dieu!” Maman exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air along with a few French curses. “Cover Kol’s ears so he doesn’t hear the bad words. You two are worse examples now than when you were teenagers.”

Father caught both of our feigned shattered expressions. But Branka and I couldn’t keep it up for long. We burst into a fit of giggles, then pulled Maman into our circle and danced.

“Autumn Michelle Corbin!” she exclaimed. “Same goes for you Branka.”

The rain drops started. I could still smell the spring air in Paris. It was like fresh autumn air with a floral fragrance. Of course, Maman said I got it all wrong.

We laughed so much. Even Kol as I covered his head with the little hoodie, while he tried to stick his tongue out and catch rain drops. All four of us tilted our faces up to the rain and darted our tongues out to catch the rain.

Maman had that picture hung up in the living room.

“That was a good day.” Branka’s hand came around me. I nodded, watching my parents on the screen. Somewhere

along the way, either Branka or I took over the camera. Maman and dad danced together. And that love, that fucking devotion, it was on their face. Like they'd tear the whole world down for each other.

And I knew they would. Father had done it once already. He'd do it again in a heartbeat.

"Is that what a normal life looks like?" Aurora murmured.

"Probably," Byron grumbled. "Not that we would know."

My curious gaze flicked over the table. "I think the closest thing to a normal childhood was experienced by Bianca," Grace remarked.

My eyes shot to Nico's wife.

"If you count not having a mother around because she was busy paying off a debt," Bianca noted softly. "But yes, I was lucky to have my grandmother and father."

It was then that I could see it on every single face at this table. Every single man and woman carried a bit of tragedy and brokenness in their eyes. Much like Alessio's.

"You're a lucky girl," Vasili remarked.

"Yes," his wife agreed. "I had my mother but even she had her issues."

"I'm sorry you didn't have that," I said. I meant it too. Maybe we'd have a better world if we started with our children. I knew my parents fought to raise me away from all the cruelty they'd seen in their lives. "Everyone deserves a happy and safe childhood."

And as I said those words, Alessio's hand squeezed mine underneath the table. We didn't need words, because I knew exactly what he was thinking about. I brushed my thumb over his thumb, hoping that he understood how much I loved him.

"That's what I want," Branka uttered, shattering the moment. We all glanced in the direction of her finger, pointing to the screen that was frozen on the faces of my parents. "The way he's watching her, it's like they just met.

Like she's his sun. Even though her cooking sucks and she put him in the hospital a few times."

My lips curved. Chuckles filled the room. But my eyes were locked on the screen.

My parents happily-ever-after stared back at us.

WE WERE on our way back home. *Home*.

Strangely, the penthouse was home. Alessio was home. It was when I saw my parents' happiness staring back at me from Branka's clip that I realized he was my happily-ever-after. All his broken pieces, his darkness. All of it.

I just wanted him.

"You better not be fantasizing about Killian goddamn Brennan," Alessio grunted.

Killian Brennan was mouthwatering, that was for sure. But he didn't make time stand still, nor did the world fade when I looked at him. He didn't take my breath away.

That was all Alessio.

My lips curved. "Alessandro Russo, are you jealous?"

"No." Sharp. Clipped.

I put my hand on his thigh. "Nobody compares to you," I told him seriously. "Not for me."

The moonlight highlighted his sharp features. Unlike the Nikolaev or even the King brothers, Alessio was more clean cut. Kind of like Nico Morrelli. And Byron Ashford. Although I knew they were all just as ruthless.

Alessio was more my type. I liked his clean cut look but also the bad boy ruthlessness underneath it all. There wasn't a single piece of him I didn't love.

"I love you," I murmured softly.

I only had one glass of wine when Branka arrived, but I found it relaxed me. In barely a week, I had become accustomed to living in his penthouse. But more than that, I

grew used to our routine. I loved waking up in his arms. I loved seeing him with Kol. Then the kiss as he dropped us off at my parents' house. And most of all I loved our dinners and what followed once we tucked Kol in.

His eyes grew dark, then reached out his hand and took mine. "I love you more."

My heart fluttered. *He loves me.* Alessandro Russo loves me.

"Even if the Nikolaev men are pissed off at me?" I jabbed playfully.

His eyes flicked my way and then back to the road. "They are not, but they think you're hiding something," he stated. "With Sasha." I scoffed, but I didn't answer. "Whatever it is, it will come out."

"And when it does?" I asked curiously. I'd never rat out Branka, but I happened to agree with Alessio. Things would eventually come out. It'd be hard to hide Branka carving out Sasha Nikolaev's heart.

I'd still watch it, I thought to myself amused.

He just shrugged. "I guess we'll see. But you're my woman and you'll always come first. You and Kol."

My chest warmed. "You'll always come first too," I whispered. "You and Kol." A moment of silence passed between us.

"Alessio?" Hesitation slithered through me.

"Hmmm."

"I hope your friends didn't get offended," I muttered. "When I lost my shit about gun smuggling and all that."

He shrugged. "I'm sure they've heard it before."

"And you?" I questioned. "I know you distribute *stuff*." I couldn't even say the word. Guns and drugs. "Does it irk you that I disagree with it?"

"No, I love your morals and hope for a better world," he responded with a hint of dry amusement. "I've always loved them. Your eagerness to see the best this world has to offer. To save it."

"You want to save it, too," I whispered. "If you didn't, you wouldn't have ended human trafficking. You wouldn't have saved your sisters."

His eyes darted my way with a flicker of dry humor. "Maybe you give me too much credit? You'll realize who I truly am and regret us."

I shook my head. "Don't do that, Alessio," I told him in a soft voice. "I'm staying. Everything else will work itself out. Yes, we have disagreements but everyone does."

"On distribution of illegal guns?" he retorted dryly. "Or my need to kill anyone who touches you? Hunt down any man who has touched what was mine in the past four years?"

I swallowed.

"I won't let anyone touch me," I vowed. "And maybe you're not okay with your side businesses either. You were forced into it. First by your father, then as a form of survival to become stronger than him. But no matter what, I'm staying with you."

I let the words fill the silence.

"I should punish you for being so good," he finally said dryly. "And for *corrupting* me."

I chuckled. "I'll take the punishment."

"Good girl." My thighs clenched at his praise. It didn't matter what Alessio said or did, my body just responded. "When we get home- "

He let the meaning linger and heat blossomed between my thighs, pulsing and throbbing. My fingers itched to touch his slight stubble and start kissing him now. My nipples tightened painfully and Alessio's gaze lowered to them as if he could read my body.

I glanced at the dashboard noting the time. "Should we get Kol tomorrow?" I breathed. "I don't want to wake him up." And I wanted Alessio inside me the moment we got home.

His right hand reached out, while his left one remained on the wheel.

"Will your parents be okay with it?"

I chuckled. "Are you kidding me? They'd keep him day and night, then give me visitation rights if they could."

Reaching for my phone, I typed a quick message to my parents. We'd had a group chat for years. Just as I suspected, the reply was instant.

"They'll keep him and are headed to bed as we speak," I told him. My phone beeped again and a picture of a sleeping Kol came through.

I showed it to Alessio. His features softened as he watched it for a moment. "You are a good mother." I stilled. "Don't be surprised, you know you are."

"Thanks," I murmured. "My parents and Branka helped a lot. I don't know what I would have done without them."

He nodded and I couldn't shake off the feeling he was waiting for something. I just didn't know what. His thumb rubbed my bottom lip and my lips parted.

"Have you dated many men over the last few years?" His question was casual, his tone lazy but my spine stiffened. There has been nobody for me. Once Kol was born, it was all about him and my career. There was little time for anything else.

"No." I wanted to ask him the same question but I worried finding out the answer would break me. Dinner dates here and there didn't count in my book.

"What are their names?"

I sighed.

"Alessio, I don't think we should talk about that," I told him quietly. His shoulders visibly tensed and I hated it. This dark cloud full of ghosts lurking over us. "I'm here. With you. I want to be with *you*."

His hand slid down my throat, squeezed tightly, almost painfully. He didn't even realize he was doing it. I didn't whimper. I wasn't scared. After our past week together, I

trusted him. He shared big parts of himself and I wanted us to be like this for the rest of our lives.

I didn't want to worry about the four years we spent apart. I didn't want to be jealous.

"Have you set the date?" he demanded to know.

I was his already. I have always been his. Saying 'I do' wasn't going to change that.

"I don't want to rush it," I murmured. His jaw tightened and worry swarmed my mind. "Do you still want to marry me?" I rasped.

Surprise coasted through his eyes. I hadn't realized we were home until he pulled into the underground garage. He parked the car and turned to face me. His palm still cupped my face. He raked his thumb over my bottom lip again.

My tongue darted out to lick the pad of his thumb and he groaned his approval.

"You are the only woman I want to marry, Autumn."

A soft smile crept on my face. "Ditto."

"You could have better," he said it so slowly, like it pained him to even utter those words. "You want to save the world. I've been destroying it for years." His voice was gravel and the vulnerability in his eyes could destroy me.

"You're the only one I want," I said softly, nipping his thumb. "The only one I'll ever want."

He took my jaw between his fingers, nearly swallowing it with the size of his palm.

"I don't like it when you watch other men," he grumbled. "Makes me want to spank you." A soft gasp filled the space of his car. My heart hammered at the dark note in his voice and my thighs throbbed.

I squeezed them, hoping to ease the throbbing and Alessio's eyes flicked down.

"Fuck." One word. "You like the sound of a spanking?"

My body temperature spiked about twenty degrees. "I..." I could lie but the fact was that I wanted to try it. With him. "Yes," I breathed.

He exited the car, came around to open the door for me and we rushed to the penthouse. The distance seemed too long. The two of us held hands, our hearts thundering.

If someone would have asked me how we got to our bedroom or stripped naked, I wouldn't be able to answer. My body and mind was zeroed on him and only him.

"Bend over the bed, open palms on the mattress," Alessio ordered in a hoarse voice. "Legs open wide."

I obeyed without a second thought, eager for the pleasure his eyes promised. His naked chest covered my back. His hands came to my shoulders, then traveled down my arms. Goosebumps followed and shivers rolled down my spine.

"If you want me to stop," he rasped, his voice full of dark promises, "just say Kyoto."

"What?" I stammered.

"Kyoto," he grunted. I flicked him a glance over my shoulder. "I was already in love with you when we were there."

God, was it possible to feel so much happiness? The intensity in his eyes had my emotions on high alert.

Slowly, his hands traveled over my breasts, his fingers brushing over my nipples. His other hand continued the path lower and lower, until reaching my wet folds. My skin tingled, buzzing with anticipation.

"I'm going to play with you." His voice was husky, full of lust. He thrust two fingers inside me at the same time he tugged on my nipples. "I'm going to make you beg. Scream. Fall apart for me." I arched my back, rubbing against him as my moan rippled through the air. "You'll be my little toy."

"Y-yes... "

Every ounce of me came alive under his touch. His fingers curled inside me, making my toes curl with the thrumming sensation at the bottom of my stomach.

His mouth latched onto my throat from behind, sucking the sensitive skin. Nipping and marking my skin. The

friction between our bodies was enough to set the whole damn penthouse on fire.

He bit the skin on my throat and a zap of pleasure shot through every cell of me. He pulled his fingers out and my walls clenched, eager for more. Before a protest could leave my mouth, he thrust them back in.

"You're mine." His hoarse whisper was hot against the shell of my ear. I tilted my head back and Alessio captured my lips with possessive brutality. His tongue dominated every single inch of my mouth.

He thrust his fingers in and out, his thumb stroking my clit.

Slap.

My heart lunged forward, just as my body did. My pussy clenched.

Slap.

The sound reverberated through the air as my ass burned. It felt like fires licked against my ass cheeks. Heck, my entire body was on fire.

"A-Alessio..." My voice was throaty. My legs quivered.

His palm came down to my ass and he soothed the sting, rubbing my skin in circular motions. My eyes fluttered closed and my heated ass pushed eagerly against his touch.

"Do you like that?" He landed another slap on my heated skin and my breathy moan was his answer. "My woman likes this," he purred, sliding his finger up my slippery folds.

"Y-yes," I breathed. He thrust two fingers back inside me and slapped my ass cheek at the same time. Once. Twice.

The orgasm slammed into me. It felt like electricity bolted through my veins, shocking every single cell in my entire body. I screamed his name. My eyes rolled in the back of my head and stars swam behind my eyelids.

My breaths heaved in and out, like I had just ran a marathon.

He pushed his chest against my back, his mouth on my ear. "Remember that, love." My pussy throbbed, his fingers still buried deep inside my drenched core. "No other man can do this. No other man could ever make you come like this." His voice was filled with possessiveness. "If I catch any of those men, I'll cut off their dicks. Make them disappear. You're mine. You've always been mine."

I turned my head to see him. Those beautiful silver eyes had my heart drumming faster and faster. For me.

"There was nobody." The confession came easily. His breathing stilled. I put my lips on his and murmured, "There has been nobody else for me. You were my first and last. My only."

The rawness of these emotions felt like sandpaper on my skin. It left me feeling exposed, but I trusted him not to let me fall. Not this time. Not after everything.

"I haven't touched another woman since you." For a moment, maybe more, we stared at each other. Our vulnerabilities, pain and past danced in the air. "It was always you, Autumn."

Tears welled in my eyes. From the emotions. From the orgasm. He was part of me, a key piece that my heart needed to feel whole.

"Always you," I rasped, repeating his words.

Placing his hand on my lower belly, he adjusted my position and my ass thrust higher in the air.

"I'm going to fuck you. Hard and fast. Just the way you like it."

The rasp of his voice sent a shudder traveling down my spine. Then the head of his cock was at my slick entrance and he slammed into me in one quick thrust. I moaned. He grunted. And then his hand gripped my hip while his other fisted my hair.

He dominated me, thrusting into me hard and fast. Just as he promised. The coiled pleasure burned hotter and

hotter. His grip in my hair tightened. He tilted my head back and his mouth slammed over mine.

His tongue invaded my mouth with the same intensity as his cock assaulted my pussy. The tempo of our kiss increased as did his thrusting. His kiss dominated my mouth. His thrusts dominated my pussy. Alessio dominated my body.

His hand came around my front and cupped my pussy. "This is mine," he grunted through harsh breathing. "All of this is mine."

He slammed deep inside me, filling me to the hilt. His rhythm was so relentless, it slid my body on the mattress. I felt him everywhere, greedy for every hard thrust and every jerk of his hips.

"I own you," he groaned into my ear. "And you own me."

I was delirious as the pleasure built higher and higher. His thrusts turned rougher and harder. His cock pounded into me and the pleasure crashed into me. The orgasm was immediate and so violent it had my teeth chattering. Flames pulsed in my lower stomach and spread outward.

Alessio's grunts vibrated through the air with the last thrust and his hot cum spurted inside me, filling me until it trickled down my inner thighs.

We were both panting, sweat slicked bodies joined and throbbing with the most exhilarating sensation.

Just as I was about to shift, he pulled me by my hair and his voice, dark as sin, whispered into my ear, "We have only just gotten started."

And my inner walls clenched with eagerness.

CHAPTER 37

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ALESSIO



She surprised me.

She unraveled around me, always meeting my needs head on. Always giving me everything.

She was always meant to be mine. Kol, she, and I. Hopefully more kids. A lot of little girls that looked like her. Kol would be a protective big brother.

Yet, fear that my fucked up childhood would impact my skills as a father plagued me. That I wasn't worthy to be a father. That I'd ruin our son. That I'd transfer my nightmare onto my son.

A mixture of fury, regret, and animosity burned in my chest.

Not at her. Never at her.

At this shitty thing called destiny that had damaged me. I meant it when I said she deserved better. She could have *had* better. Instead, she got me. But God help me, there was no giving her up. I hated feeling a twinge of regret for attempting to be decent.

I wasn't. Decency was fucked right out of me.

I stroked a stray strand of her hair off her sweaty face. She was fast asleep, naked in our bed. Her soft curves had my handprints from where I gripped her hips and fucked her raw. Her ass was marked by me too. And still she looked like innocence, sprawled for the filthy scum I was.

Pulling a sheet over her naked body, a soft moan left through her parted lips and my cock instantly hardened.

I straightened up to my full length and adjusted my cufflinks, rather than touch her again. If I touched her again, I'd wake her up and take her all over again. If I stripped my clothes off and fucked her, I'd be late.

And I had a fucking DiLustro to meet.

Dante DiLustro.

OF COURSE, Lake Ontario in November wasn't the best idea. Meeting a fucking kingpin of Chicago in the middle of the lake even less so.

But I wanted to get rid of the last shipment of guns and then I was out.

For Autumn. For our son. For our family.

Our future. I'd marry my woman, get her pregnant and we'd have a big family. We'd see the world together. Fuck, I'd even sing and dance in the rain to some obnoxious song, as long as she smiled happily like she had in that video.

Was there another man that put that smile on her face back then?

She glowed in that video. And when her eyes lowered to our little Kol, there was so much love on her face. The unconditional kind that said she'd burn down the world for him.

And I'd burn down the world for them.

The temperatures had plummeted overnight, and I swore my balls froze the moment I stepped out of the cabin of my yacht. It would have been so much better to stay in bed and wake up with morning sex, then cook Autumn and Kol breakfast.

I might even become a stay home dad, I snickered to myself. *Hmm.* Not such a bad idea.

I watched the rays of the sun flicker across the surface of the lake and a calmness washed over me. Going fully legal was the right move, I felt it deep in my bones. I'd still keep us safe. I'd still have men watching my family. I've built enough businesses over the years to support us for many lifetimes.

Last night, I gave my friends a heads up. They weren't surprised. It wouldn't change our friendship and I still planned on keeping human trafficking through the territories at bay.

"Russo."

Dante stepped off his yacht onto mine. "DiLustro."

Much like his cousin who wreaked havoc in New York City, Dante created chaos in Chicago while his brother, Priest, did the same in Philly. It was comical really, because Dante and Basilio looked more like brothers and Priest should be the cousin.

The Russian cousin, I sneered.

What. The. Fuck. Ever.

Their family clusterfuck wasn't my problem.

I crossed my arms over my chest and watched him. The young prick was alright, but anything that remotely touched the Ashford connection had always irritated me.

Not that the DiLustros and I were connected. Their connection came from Byron's mother's side.

He handed me a large suitcase that I passed to Ricardo.

"Next time, I'd rather do a wire transfer," Dante retorted dryly.

Ignoring his comment, I tilted my chin towards the steps that lead under the deck. "There won't be a next time," I said coldly. "Have your guys get the guns off my ship."

He issued a wordless order to his men who started moving. My men were all over the boat so there was no chance of them getting *lost*.

"What do you mean there won't be a next time?" Dante questioned, while I shared a look with Ricardo. I told him

on the way here, I was getting out. It had been on my mind for a while, but Autumn was right. While my father was alive, it was about survival and power. And the only way to accomplish it was by surpassing him.

The fucker was dead. I'd work with Ricardo and slowly transfer the illegal side of the business to him. He'd been loyal and stood by me through all those years.

"It means I'm getting out," I said dryly. "Or do you need further clarification?"

"Goddamn it," Dante spat out. "I just shook on a whole year's worth of supplies and you're fucking bailing."

"Didn't know." Didn't care, either.

The moment the guns were off my ship, so was Dante.

The prick flipped me the bird while standing on the deck of his yacht.

I laughed, lighter than I've felt in a long time.

If only I knew, I wouldn't be the last one laughing.

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CHAPTER 38

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AUTUMN



I woke up to an incessant buzzing.

The moment I moved, the stinging pain exploded through my whole body. A dull ache pulsed between my thighs and my ass hurt.

Buzz. Buzz.

"Alessio, get that," I murmured sleepily as I rolled to my side, only to wince. My whole body was sore.

Then memories from last night rushed to the front of my mind and my pussy throbbed like it was ready for another round. Holy shit.

I needed a few days to recover from that.

Buzz. Buzz.

I barely peeled my eyelids open.

"Empty," I rasped. That was odd. Alessio usually woke me up before he left for work.

Buzz. Buzz.

I finally recognized the vibration. It was my cell phone. Reaching for it on the nightstand, I answered without looking at the caller ID.

"Hello?"

Oh God, it hurt to move my mouth too. Maybe last night's activities required a lot of practice to build up strength.

A soft snort escaped me.

"Autumn?"

"Yeah?" My brain was too tired to distinguish the voice.

"Why are you snorting?" Loren! That was who the voice belonged to.

"Why are you calling so early?" I asked instead.

"Aren't you usually an early bird?" he retorted dryly.

"I had a late night. Why are you calling?"

"I got us a flight," he answered and I shot up into a sitting position, the sheet sliding off my body. A memory, maybe a dream, flickered. Alessio covering me up.

"When?"

"Leaving LaGuardia tonight."

"Shit," I muttered. "That means I'd have to leave now. I have to check flights for New York City from Montréal."

Loren chuckled. "I already did, and I got you a ticket. You have to be at the airport in two hours. I know, you love me."

"Two hours!" I exclaimed and jumped out of bed. I was butt naked and he expected me to be at the airport in two hours?

Goosebumps broke through my skin. Brrr.

"Get your ass to the Air Canada counter. They'll have your boarding pass."

I called my parents. Kol was set. Not that I gave them all the details. I got called on a job and have to fly out right away. Alessio was out but he'd come and get Kol.

I called Branka next. That conversation didn't go so well.

"I have to get to the airport." I got straight to business. "Can you take me please?"

I heard her yawn. "Sure thing. When?"

"Like right now."

"Jesus, talk about notice. Where is this job taking you?"

"Afghanistan."

"Are you fucking nuts?" she screeched. "And Alessio is okay with it?"

I pushed my hand through my hair. I was still naked, running around looking for some clothes. I didn't bring much here.

"Can you come and get me?" I begged. "All my stuff's at my parents. I can't pack the stuff that Alessio bought me."

"So he's not letting you go?"

"Branka!" I exclaimed. "He's not here. I don't know where he is. I have to be at the airport in less than two hours."

"Jesus, Autumn, you're going to get me on my brother's shit list." Her voice sounded a tad bit whiney. Lack of sleep always made her cranky. Super cranky.

"Please, Branka. This is important," I begged. "I'll call Alessio and explain."

"Want me to come along?" she offered.

"No, you stay here. I'll be back in less than a week. Just be here for Kol, Alessio, and my parents." When she remained quiet, I added softly, "Please."

"Fine, fine," she caved. "I'm coming to get you."

Then a thought slammed into my mind. "Remember when you mentioned Sasha said you're not ready yet for what he had to give you?"

I could hear her bitter laugh. "Yes, I remember every goddamn lie that fucker uttered."

I cleared my throat. "I'm not defending him but what if he—" I didn't know how to say it delicately. I cleared my throat one more time. "What if he was into, like rough stuff and didn't want to scare you?"

"Huh?"

"What if he was—"

"I heard you, but where in the hell did that come from? Did you and—" She couldn't finish the sentence, but I knew where it was going. "Oh my gosh, don't tell me. There are certain things nobody wants to know about their own brother and best friend."

“Ummm, it was just a thought,” I muttered, my cheeks burning like I was in hell. “It’s possible. You were young when you first met him.”

“And that Olympic skater is the same age I was, and it doesn’t seem like he’s keeping his hands to himself,” she grumbled. “Call my brother,” she added coldly. Yeah, Sasha Nikolaev was history in Branka’s book. “Or he’ll have my head.”

I tried to call him. I really did.

I just never got through to him. So I left him a voicemail.

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CHAPTER 39

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ALESSIO



The moment my yacht docked, my phone signaled a voicemail.

I keyed in my code and listened.

“Alessio, it’s me. The crew is doing a quick job. I’m going to be back in less than a week. Kol is still with my parents. Will you keep him with you? He’s gotten used to you and our routine. My parents offered to watch him whenever you have to go to work. Branka said she’ll help too.” She cleared her throat. “Keep my baby safe. Okay? Love you.”

I dialed her immediately. She hadn’t exactly told me where she was going.

The dread formed a crease on my forehead. My sixth sense flashed a warning. Yesterday’s news rushed to my mind. Except, she said the trip wasn’t approved.

I dialed up Nico. “Alessio.”

“I need a big favor,” I started. “Check if *National Geographic* approved an expedition to the Middle East. Afghanistan specifically.”

“Shit, don’t tell me—”

“She left while I was out,” I grumbled. “She didn’t say where.”

“Did she take Kol?”

“No, she asked me to keep him.” Goddamn it, why was my phone off?

"That's good," Nico retorted. "She'll be back. Ah, here we go. *National Geographic* halted all their articles and expeditions to the Middle East."

"Good." Except, this dread in the pit of my stomach refused to recede.

"I'm happy for you, Alessio," Nico drawled. "It turns out that young forbidden thing was exactly what you needed."

"You don't say."

But he was right.

Autumn was exactly what I needed.

After decades of beatings, screams, and scars, she had given me the best life had to offer. Her soft touch healed my scars.

THAT NIGHT, Kol and I worked on our dinner together. My son threw veggies into a bowl with a big smile, while I read the recipe.

"It says we mix peas, corn, and carrots," I told him. Both of us scrunched our noses at the mention of carrots. "Yeah, I don't like carrots either."

"Purée," Kol murmured.

I chuckled. "You want mashed potatoes?" He nodded eagerly. "You got it. Mashed potatoes with peas and corn, maybe a side of chicken confit." Another nod. "How about we order in, buddy? I asked. "Daddy has only recently started cooking. I can make eggs but dinner will need some practice."

"Daddy."

I froze.

The word 'daddy' slipped from me, but I couldn't find it in me to regret it. Not now that I heard it repeated. Nothing had ever sounded as sweet as hearing Kol call me daddy.

My chest grew full and a tremble started in my hand. I had never in all my life thought I'd want kids. Not until Autumn came back into my life.

The love and protectiveness, unlike anything ever before, grew fast and strong. This feeling entered my heart the moment I learned of Kol but the strength of these emotions snuck up on me.

Fast. Invisible. Tugging at the strings in my blood. A protective urge welled in my chest.

Kol was the most beautiful and pure thing that could have happened to me. He and Autumn were a precious gift to me.

My blood. My life. My reason.

Let anyone try to keep either one of them from me and I'd destroy them

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CHAPTER 40

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ALESSIO



Three fucking days.

Autumn's parents were worried too. She usually checked in. She hadn't called them once. She hadn't called me either.

They said it only happened once before. When she got stuck in the Central African Republic Civil War.

Nico hadn't been able to track her. There was only one ticket in her name that took her to New York City. After that, the trail went cold. Branka claimed she hadn't heard from her either. She couldn't have disappeared into thin air. Why in the fuck hadn't she said where she was going?

Anguish bit at my chest. I ran my hands through my hair, while the steady worry radiated in my core.

I was fucking scared. Scared that I'd lose her. Scared that it'd be one more thing taken away from me.

But I kept it together. For our son.

I brought Kol to my manor. Autumn's parents spent a lot of time here, right along with Branka. The penthouse would have been easier for Mr. and Mrs. Corbin, but I didn't want them nor Branka there. It was ridiculous, but it was the space for Autumn, Kol, and me. Nobody else.

"Are you going to keep the drug distribution business?" Vasili asked.

I shook my head. "No, I'm out."

"DiLustro is pissed off," Alexei stated in his cold voice.

"I don't give a shit." Autumn and Kol were the only thing that mattered. "Ricardo will take over the illegal business side of things. I'll help him with the transition but I'm out."

"You know whatever you need, we're always here," Nico offered. "Byron offered his security agency. The Ashfords will always stand behind you."

"You can always count on us," Cassio repeated the same words from before. When I first told him, he didn't try to dissuade me. He supported my decision.

I shook my head. "Thank you. Likewise."

They were friends but also family. They've had my back and I'd have theirs.

"Ricardo is a good choice," Cassio switched subjects. "His values are similar to ours."

"That's the reason I chose him."

"Have you heard from Autumn?" Nico asked. I shook my head and pushed my hand through my hair. Again. I itched to light up a cigarette. But I didn't. I didn't want Kol smelling it on me. "She sure knows how to cover her tracks, huh?"

Either that or she traveled under a different name. Or her crew rented a private-

I never got to finish the thought because Branka barged into my home office, ignoring that I had a room full of men.

Cassio, Luca, Nico, Alexei, and Vasili raised their eyebrows. Our women knew better than to barge into a meeting. Not that they weren't welcomed, but they usually preferred to stay out of the illegal side of the businesses.

My sister's disheveled hair combined with the frantic look in her eyes had me straightening up in my chair. Kol was in her arms, screaming at the top of his lungs. She had to be freaking him out with her panic.

"Alessio, turn on the news."

It was hardly the time for news. I shot to my feet and strode towards her. She was supposed to be babysitting

Kol, not fucking scaring him.

"Branka- "

"Turn on the fucking news," she screamed.

Kol let out another high-pitched wail, and I took him from her and went back to sit back down in my seat.

"Alessio- "

I tilted my chin towards the remote that sat on the little coffee table. I rarely turned on the TV in my office but liked to have it handy in case I had to track any critical news.

"Here, buddy," I said softly, handing him a crayon. Yes, suddenly my office desk was stocked with crayons and toys. I had a lot of catching up to do. "Your aunt is a bit nuts."

His chubby hands reached for it and he instantly calmed down. He started to kick his hands and feet. The kid loved to draw. Autumn said it always calmed him down.

"Fatherhood suits you," Nico drawled. I thought so too. In fact, I couldn't wait to have more kids with Autumn. A houseful. But first I had to marry her. If only her damn job wouldn't have called her.

I'd have to look into buying *National Geographic* to ensure all Autumn's assignments were within driving distance from our home.

"Daddy." I'd never tire of hearing that word. Nothing, fucking nothing compared to it.

The news came on. Middle East. Afghanistan. Crowds of people, chaos.

"When did you start caring about the situation in the Middle East?" Luca asked dryly. "Aren't you a matchmaker or a blogger? Some weird shit like that."

A few soft snickers traveled around the table. My friends might have not seen Branka grow up but they've heard me talk about her plenty. It was probably why they knew her so well.

"Autumn is in trouble." My eyes snapped to my little sister. "I told her not to go," she muttered, her hand with the remote visibly shaking.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, dread pooling in the pit of my stomach. Branka usually didn’t get so frazzled.

“Where is Autumn?” I asked, although in my heart I knew.

Before Branka had a chance to answer, the beauty that had been my obsession since her eighteenth birthday showed up on the screen.

The screaming crowds, shots fired, dead bodies covered with filthy sheets. Crying. Misery. A war and my woman was there.

“You knew she was going to Afghanistan?” I roared, glaring at my little sister.

Kol startled on my lap, his gray eyes with the freckles of hazel green, shot up to me. I forced myself to calm down and smiled at the boy.

“It’s okay,” I assured him, keeping my tone leveled, though something heavy settled in my chest. Fear.

This was worse than waking up after being drugged and knowing what had been done to me. This was so much worse. I’d take a hundred more episodes of that, if only Autumn was here. Safe. Protected.

Not on the screen, in the middle of a fucking war.

Autumn’s camera hung heavy around her neck. Heavy exhaustion lingered on her face.

“How is she there if the trip wasn’t approved?” I demanded to know, keeping fury at bay.

“They went as freelancers,” Branka mumbled. “They are good and tend to snap footage and photos that nobody else does. Sometimes they get pulled into interviews.”

“Maman.” Kol’s both hands banged on the desk, seeing his mother on the screen. “Maman.”

“Yes, it’s Maman.” The words choked my throat. My fucking heart ached like someone had taken it and hammered it to pieces.

Autumn seemed calm. Someone was interviewing her. Her words and compassion resonated in her eyes along with the glistening of unshed tears.

And terror.

Sheer terror shone in her hazel eyes that now looked more brown than ever before. It might not be evident to others but it was clear as day to me. My ears buzzed, her words barely registering.

She wore plain black cargo pants and a white t-shirt, which wasn't so white. There were smudges of dirt and blood on it. Her jet-black hair was pulled up in a high ponytail. She looked younger than her twenty-six. Too young to save a goddamn world. Her chest had blotches of red, her knuckles gripping the microphone were chalk white.

She was scared shitless.

"How could you not tell me that she'd headed for Afghanistan?" I hissed in a low voice, glaring at my little sister. "There's a fucking war going on there. She can't be there."

"She's been there before," she justified. "Yes, it's dangerous but the troops are there. I thought she'd be safe. She always kept a security escort with her."

"Well, where in the fuck is the security escort now?" I gritted. Kol's eyes darted between Branka and me. The last thing I wanted to do was frighten him.

"I don't know, Alessio," she snapped. "I'm not her babysitter, you know. She's a grown woman and she wants to save the fucking world. So instead of preaching at me for not fucking snitching on her, do something about her situation."

"Sasha has military experience," Vasili offered. It didn't escape me how Branka stiffened. "Not sure if he has connections to anyone in the Middle East though."

He already started typing a message.

“Sasha has been busy stirring up trouble,” Luca chimed in, rolling his eyes. “I think he’s aiming to wipe out the DiLustros.”

“Don’t you fucking dare even give him that idea,” Cassio gritted, warning clear in his voice. “Sasha can be a nutcase when he’s pissed off.”

“You don’t say,” Vasili muttered begrudgingly. “I’m terrified of Luca and Sasha in the same room in Portugal. I’m praying one of them doesn’t show up.”

Ignoring the Sasha and DiLustros' topic, the wheels in my brain started churning. Logistics of getting to Afghanistan.

“My plane could take me there.” I’d have to get my pilot to prepare the plane right away.

“They are not allowing any flights in,” Nico responded. “They’ve even shot down a military flight. They’d shoot down your plane for sure. It’s a fucking disaster over there. The worst time for anyone to be stuck in that clusterfuck.”

Cassio turned to look at me. “How about Byron? He might have a way to get there.”

My biological father would have connections to get me there. Senator Ashford. The guy I hated with every goddamn fiber of my being. But to get Autumn out, I’d get down on my knees and beg that fucker to get me into Afghanistan. Or get my woman out.

I snatched my phone and started typing a message. One to Byron.

One to Dante DiLustro. ***I need the name of your Afghan contact. Need a way into the country. Name your price.***

Dante DiLustro was one of the rare guys to deal directly with Afghanis. He thought he was sneaky with that shit, but I had my own resources. He bought their drugs and traded them with guns. My guns. And I had plenty of those. Yes, I was out, but if it meant saving Autumn, I’d give him more fucking guns.

The door swung open. Autumn's mother and father walked in. And by the looks of it, they didn't know she was going to Afghanistan either. Her mother's face darted to the television and her hand flew to her mouth, covering it, stopping a sob from coming out.

"I've sent messages to my contacts." Her father's voice was hoarse. "They are all in an official capacity and can't help."

"What was she thinking?" Mrs. Corbin choked out. "She promised after Central Africa she wouldn't take risks."

"I don't think she thought it'd get bad so fast," Branka whispered.

"Did she tell you?" Mrs. Corbin demanded to know. The answer was on Branka's face. "Oh, Branka. Why didn't you say something?" Mrs. Corbin's hand came to her forehead. "Why did she have to inherit her father's tendencies to save the world?"

"I'm right here, you know," her father retorted dryly. "Autumn is stubborn like her mother."

"The worst combination," Mrs. Corbin said, her eyes glued to the television. "Alessio, do you have contacts? I could reach out to my parents—"

Who I intended to kill.

"Absolutely not!" Her father cut in. I agreed. "They'd never bring her back."

"I could reach out to some of my old contacts," Mrs. Corbin suggested. "They'll remember me."

"Let's keep them as a last resort," I remarked. "I'm reaching out to all my resources."

The meaning behind it wasn't missed on either one of them. They were illegal resources.

My phone beeped and I slid the message open, but before I got to read it, screams and gunfire came from the television.

Autumn was being interviewed, a microphone in her hand and a camera hung around her neck.

"Behind you," someone shouted to her and her body twisted to glance behind her. A gun pointed at a woman holding a child.

In horror, I watched Autumn drop the microphone and shove her body through the crowd of frantic, screaming people. Her goal was the woman with the child.

"Jesus Christ, baby," I rasped. "Run the other way. Don't save the world today. Fuck, not today."

I should have stayed in bed that morning. Fuck the gun distribution. Fuck it all. I should have stayed in bed. Kept her from leaving, even if it meant locking her up.

"Hey. Hey. Heeey!" Her normally soft voice screamed so loud, penetrating the air even through the television, it almost felt like she was here. The air in my office stilled, the silence was thick with tension. Not even Kol dared to move. We all held our breaths, or maybe it was just me.

"What are you doing?" Autumn scolded the soldier. "You can't do that! Get that gun away from her and the baby."

"Stay back, woman. Or you're next." The man with a thick accent shifted his attention to Autumn, his gun now pointed at her slim frame. I watched as more guns shifted her way - from both sides. The U.S. military behind her and the local rebel forces in front of her.

Through the fog, I could hear gasps in the office. Mrs. Corbin's whimpers. Kol calling for his maman.

Amidst all the death and chaos on screen and muttering in my office, the only thing I could focus on was my woman. She was a light among the blackness of the world. Whoever was recording the whole scene zoomed in on the gun and my heart froze. It fucking froze right in my chest.

Those were my guns. The symbol of the letter 'A' with the skull.

I closed my eyes, hoping I was seeing it wrong. It couldn't be. My own guns. I knew they were going to Afghanistan. I didn't care.

Until now.

And for the first time in my whole fucked up life, I prayed.

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CHAPTER 41

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AUTUMN



I hadn't imagined in a million years that I'd be staring at the barrel of a gun.

And true to the phrase, my life flashed right in front of my eyes. The first day I saw Alessio. The image of me staring at him upside down. First time he drove me home and we never made it to my parents' house. Instead, we spent the wildest night of my life in his penthouse. The days and nights we spent together all over the world. The birth of our son. That feeling of loneliness as I held Kol for the first time and the regret of not sharing it with Alessio. All the way to the last morning when I left without seeing him, three days ago.

Three days of one disaster after next. My phone was stolen. Then the flight dropped us off at the wrong airport. We were supposed to be dropped off at Bagram. We were dropped off in Kabul. The center of the disaster.

The AK-47 pointed at me. My heart hammered against my ribs. *Click. Click.*

My eyes locked on the end of the gun. It felt like staring at the dark tunnel and there was no light at the end of this road. I held my breath.

Alessio. Kol. My happily-ever-after. My parents.

I wasn't ready to die. I couldn't die.

My hands shot up into the air.

“Don’t shoot,” I yelled. “Please, don’t shoot.” My voice shook, sounding far away to my own ears. Like I was underwater and there was all this commotion going on around me.

I blinked, then blinked again. The crying baby and whimpering voice of a mother registered behind me. Shouting in the distance. Begging. I heard soldiers, from both sides, shouting for the other to lower the guns. Neither did.

I glanced over my shoulder to the crying mother. A very young mother.

“Shhh. It’s going to be okay.” Every single word scraped through my chest, tangling with a fear that made it hard to breathe.

I had no idea if the woman understood me. I had no fucking idea if we would be okay. But I had to believe it. It was the only thing keeping me on my feet right now while my knees trembled.

But I stood firm. I met the dark eyes of the soldier who trained his gun on me. One of Alessio’s guns. He was young, even younger than me. And yet, all I saw was hate in his eyes. My heart clenched.

I wanted to beg him to spare us. I wanted to tell him I had a family to go back home to. But the words got stuck in my throat. I didn’t think it would have worked anyhow. The bitterness in those dark eyes was too deep.

And still I wondered what drove this man here. To point a gun at a mere stranger. In my entire life, I had never physically hurt another being. I never understood how one human could hurt another. And yet, at this moment, I wondered. If it came down to him or us, could I kill him? Could I pull the trigger if I had a gun?

The answer was terrifying. It was self-preservation mode that made the world turn. We all wanted to survive, one way or another. But some humans were just crueler than

others. Like this guy who had no issues shooting a woman with a small child nor me, for that matter.

"You don't want to do that." I found my voice. Maybe the right words. "The camera is still rolling." I flicked my eyes at the cameramen that were situated behind the wall that meant safety. Just one wall dividing chaos from some semblance of safety. "Let us go."

I couldn't die. Not like this. Not by the gun stamped with Alessio's symbol.

Destiny wouldn't be so cruel to let me die by the very same gun that Alessio sold. Right? Though if I made it back, I'd have a heart-to-heart with him. My frustration and fear mounted by the second.

His finger tightened on the trigger and I held my breath. This was it.

I closed my eyes. Smiling faces of Alessio and Kol flashed in my mind. The hot Afghan air kissed my skin. Men and women speaking unfamiliar tongues drifted through the air. Cries. Gunfire. Warnings. Somewhere in the distance, a familiar ritual melody rolled through the air.

A prayer.

Taking a deep breath, I let the soothing words I couldn't understand fill my lungs. It was calming, regardless of the type of prayer it was. And I didn't give a shit which religion it was, but I took it as a good sign.

Any prayer was welcomed, because I firmly believed not a single religion on Earth would wish for anyone's death.

Humans were the ones that caused hurt and killed.

And as if whoever was listening to my thoughts up above wanted to prove a point, a round of gunfire blazed through the air.

A hard body slammed into mine. My eyes shot open. The world moved too quickly. All I could see was a silver gray beard as a masculine scent flooded my lungs.

And the dumbest thought lingered.

At least I'd die with a nice smelling guy on top of me.

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CHAPTER 42

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ALESSIO



The elevator door parted, stopping at the top floor of the hotel.

The door to the large ballroom opened up, revealing a room full of politicians and people who believed in them. Or more likely, people who could benefit from them.

These events were full of fake smiles and handshakes.

The entire room was wide open. One side of the room held a glass sliding door that led to the rooftop deck. The glass doors were closed, the early December temperatures too bitter cold to mingle outside.

A waiter immediately approached me with a tray full of drinks. I had no intention of drinking tonight, but I grabbed a glass filled with brownish hued liquid.

I scanned the crowd, looking for my target. Senator Ashford.

It took me a bit to spot him. With some blonde bimbo who looked younger than his daughter. Once a player, always a goddamn player.

Three weeks and three days.

The world had gone quiet on the situation in Afghanistan. I'd been getting bits and pieces of information on a group hiding in the mountains. Noshaq mountain scaled the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

I found my way to Pakistan. I searched the mountains covered in snow. But each time I tried to get into Afghanistan, I ran into a roadblock.

Byron went through all his resources and friends from his military days. It seemed the entire world was cut off from entering the country.

"Alessio," Byron greeted me.

"Byron."

"Anything?" He'd been helping. Trying to, anyhow. But we kept running into dead ends.

"Nothing new," I gritted, my eyes on Senator Ashford who was laughing, carefree, most likely drinking his cognac. "Just rumors about mercenaries that got stuck in the country and are hiding in the mountains. They say there are foreign women with them."

Except there were absolutely no details on the women. Nor the mercenaries. Who were they working for?

I watched my father take a cigar out of his pocket and someone was already shoving their hand to light it up. Apparently, the no smoking rule didn't apply to the bastard. He inhaled, then released, creating a whirlwind of smoke around him.

"Has he said anything?" I asked Byron, who was watching his father.

"No, just that if you want to know, you'll come directly to him."

The only reason I came was for Autumn and our son. I'd burn the world for them. Crawl on my knees for them. Bottom line, there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for them. So if Senator Ashford wanted me to come directly to him - for them, I would.

As if sensing my gaze on him, Senator Ashford turned his head and our eyes met. It was the second time I'd been in the same room with him. The last time was ten years ago when he sought me out.

For fucking money for his campaign.

He excused himself, leaving the young bimbo behind, and made his way over. The closer he got, the tighter my grip was on the glass I held.

I was a fucking forty-two-year-old man and I still couldn't move past the fact that the fucker left my mother when she needed him the most. Left me to be raised by a sadistic bastard.

"Alessio," he greeted me.

"Senator Ashford." His bushy brows furrowed. He despised that I refused to call him by his first name. "I won't waste your time," I started. "Nor mine. My wife- "

"She's not your wife," he stopped me.

My teeth clenched so hard that it felt like my molars were about to crack in half.

"Not yet. But she's the mother of my child," I gritted. "If she wasn't stuck in Afghanistan, she'd be my wife right now. So you'll forgive me if I don't turn my back on a woman as easily as some other people."

His jaw ticked. Ah, finally! I hit a nerve. "I didn't turn my back on your mother."

My eyes roamed the room, seemingly casual. "Is that what you tell yourself to sleep better? I imagine lying to yourself is probably even easier than lying to everyone else."

"Alessio, your mother was better off without me."

I took a step forward, standing up straighter. My frame towering over him. "Yeah, my mother was so much better getting beaten by a sadistic bastard. She was so much better getting whipped and raped. She was so much better seeing her own children being terrorized and being so beaten down that she couldn't even gather enough strength to defend them."

"If I knew- "

"Don't," I hissed, my muscles rigid. I was ready to snap and that wouldn't help Autumn. "Spare us all your lies. I want to know if you can help me or not," I continued in a

cold tone. "Other than that, I'm not interested in anything else from you."

The icy silence followed and permeated the air along with an understanding crossing Senator Ashford's expression. There could have also been some pain that crossed his face, but I didn't care. It was too late. Forty-two years too late.

There would be no repairing this relationship.

"I've kept tabs on you," he said, his voice suddenly tainted with fatigue. "You and Autumn Corbin." I tensed, and Senator Ashford's lips tugged up. Barely. "When I got news of her departing for Afghanistan, I reached out to an old friend who owes me a favor. He owns a security protection agency. They kept tabs on her. Unfortunately, when all the chaos broke loose there, so did all my communications with them. But the last report I had from him indicated he had her and she was safe."

"When?" I croaked.

"Two weeks ago."

"Where were they headed?" I demanded to know.

"For the mountains," my father answered. "With all the technology left behind, the new regime has a way of monitoring all communications. My guy said he wouldn't be able to call again until they could find a safe spot."

My heart sank.

If he hadn't heard from him again, it meant they weren't safe.

CHAPTER 43

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AUTUMN



Six weeks away from my son. Six weeks away from Alessio.

Another cave. We've been hiding in caves, moving every few days. I was sick and tired of caves and mountains. And this cold that seeped into my bones.

My muscles ached. My heart hurt even worse. And I was so fucking hungry. I had no idea what time it was. Night. It was dark outside. My teeth chattered from the cold.

A sniffle. Then another sniffle. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

There were people that lived like this their entire lives. We'd been at it for six weeks and I was falling apart. It didn't take long, about a week. But I was too proud to let it show. The young woman with the child didn't cry. She was grateful, smiling even, that she had protection from these men. I was thankful too. The moment all hell broke loose in Kabul, it was only thanks to this group of four men that we'd escaped. They'd surrounded us and shuffled us out of the area, while bullets flew all around us.

I squeezed my eyes shut, the backs of my eyes burning and threatening to let the tears flow. I knew once they let loose, there'd be nothing holding them back. I brought my knees to my chest, laying on the hard cave floor and wrapped my arms around me for some heat.

The burka and the clothes I wore underneath it offered barely any warmth. One of the security guys gave me one of his shirts. All our stuff was left behind. I had my camera, they had their guns, and all of us had the clothes on our backs.

That was it.

As we traveled on foot, through the villages in the dead of the night running from the group of men that had put a price on our heads and threatened any local who'd help us.

And still we found kindness in the most unlikely places.

In one of the villages, a woman offered me her burka. They had barely anything and she still offered me her best burka so I could pass as a local. Another man gave us food to go. We didn't dare stay in anyone's home and bring trouble to their doorstep.

The first tear rolled down my face. It was Christmas Eve back home. It was Christmas day here.

It would be my first Christmas away from my family. First Christmas without Kol. A lump formed in my throat. It squeezed and squeezed, until I couldn't breathe. A wheeze escaped me and I quickly swallowed the sob forming on my lips.

But another followed.

And my body started to shake as each new sob rolled through me. My hands covered my mouth, my fingers trembling. I squeezed my eyes hard, hoping to get myself together before someone woke up.

And Salma's baby needed sleep.

That was the name of the woman with the baby. Salma and her little girl, Azaia.

She was an Afghani up and coming female reporter. And when the shit hit the fan, they came after her. She never made it to the gate that would have secured her and her baby's safety.

I didn't regret jumping to her rescue. I really didn't.

But never in a million years had I thought we'd end up here. Cut off from the world. Cut off from safety.

"We'll get out of here." The deep, raspy voice came from behind me.

Kian. No last names.

The fifty-something-year-old man that had saved my life. Why? I had no fucking idea. I guess kind of like I had no idea why I jumped in front of Salma. Kian barely talked. He was one of those silent, mysterious types.

Six weeks together and I only knew his name.

"It's Christmas," I whispered, glancing over my shoulder and meeting his dark gaze. His eyes were the colors of the darkest, starless night. I could see the silver grays in his hair and stubble, making me wonder again what he was doing here.

He was a well off guy. Call it intuition, but I'd stake my life on it. Or it could be the quality of his clothes, guns, and watch around his wrist.

"You celebrate Christmas?"

"Yes." But it wasn't that which made this hard. "Do you?"

"It's been a while."

I turned back around and stared at the wall of the cave as a shiver rolled down my spine. It was damp and so fucking cold, even with the fire going. "It's the longest I've ever been away from my son," I croaked, my voice barely above whisper.

"Hmmm."

A long pause followed.

"You have kids?" I asked. I should get some rest, we both needed it. We'd probably have to hike again tomorrow. Though where in the fuck we were hiking to, I had no idea. Kian refused to share his plans.

"No." I felt like there was a story to his answer but I knew he wouldn't share it. It took me a whole week to get his name out of him. Kian was the one who stuck to me, like

he was my personal bodyguard. But conversations were non-existent. Another shiver rolled down my spine. "Are you cold?"

"No," I lied.

He sighed and pulled me over. "You're not my type," I grunted, though his body heat felt so fucking good. "And I'm in love with someone else," I added. "I was going to marry him. I'm not even sure why I didn't drag him to the courthouse right away. It was all stupid. Four years apart, I finally get him back and then I can't set the date. The best part was me rushing here and now this."

The vibration of his chest pressed against my back had me turning my head over. He was laughing. "What's so funny?"

"Don't worry, Autumn," he said, closing his eyes. "You're not my type either. We're just sharing our body heat. Go to sleep."

My body relaxed, enveloped in his warmth.

The last thought lingering in my mind before I drifted off to sleep was that neither one of us smelled that great anymore.

OH MY GOD.

This couldn't be my life. Another fucking month. Maybe more. I couldn't keep track of days. The local military was on our tail. We had to backtrack, go down the mountain, then back up. If I never saw another damn mountain in my life, it would be too soon.

"What month is it?" I asked Salma. "January?"

"February, I think," she grumbled. "The Olympics were scheduled for February," she remarked for no good reason. I glanced over at her, wondering where that even came from. She just shrugged. "My parents love watching ice

skating." I blinked. Okay, that was bizarre. "And I just finished my period. Yeah, definitely February."

Period. I haven't had my period since—

I blinked. It had to be all the stress. And lack of food. My stomach growled.

"Do you want my bread?" she offered, but I immediately shook my head. She was nursing her baby. She needed food more than me. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, thank you," I muttered, though my mouth salivated.

If we ever make it back, I'd beg Maman to bake me some fresh bread. Nothing on it, just bread. On second thought, maybe it'd be wiser to go to a bakery. I couldn't risk food poisoning.

"Are your parents in the States?" I asked her.

She nodded. "They left thirty years ago. I was born in the States, but five years ago, I got the bright idea to move back here. My roots and all that. I thought it'd be safe. I guess the joke's on me."

"I don't think anyone thought it'd end like this," I muttered. "I'd kill for a nice warm bath right now though."

"And a five course meal," she added wistfully.

Both of us laughed but there was no humor in it.

Her baby slept peacefully in her arms. I brushed my fingers through her dark hair. We were lucky the baby slept. In a few instances where we had to take cover and hide, I could feel the tension from the men, flickering anxious looks the baby's way. One wail and we would have died. But little Azaia never woke up.

"What are you going to do when you get back?" Salma asked. The men barely talked to us so it left only the two of us to get acquainted. I felt like there were no secrets left between us, not that I had many. Only one.

The sound of gunfire resumed somewhere in the distance. Neither Salma nor I flinched. We were used to it

by now. We could recognize when it was too close or when it was safe enough in the distance not to worry about it.

It only took us a few days to get used to those sounds.

I looked over the horizon. The valley and city of Bagram stretched in front of us. I guess you could call it a city. It was once an ancient city located at the junction of the Ghorband and Panjshir Valley. Salma was good at history too. The view would be breathtaking if not for the constant fear looming over our heads.

The camera still hung around my neck. I hadn't taken a single picture since that day in Kabul. But as I stared at the horizon and mountains on the other side of the valley, I picked up my camera and looked through the lens.

"I'm going to marry Alessio," I murmured, staring at the view. "If he'll still have me."

Salma chuckled. "He'll have you."

I pushed the button to snap the pictures and for the first time in months, the clicking of the camera soothed.

Both Salma and I heard the steps behind us at the same time and we jumped to our feet.

A swish of air left my lungs. "Kian, you scared us to death."

He handed me a device. A bulky device that looked like an ancient telephone. Without cords.

"What's that?"

"Satellite phone. Call your son."

My eyes snapped to him, meeting his dark gaze.

"Why haven't we used it before?" I hissed. "We could have been out of this hellhole."

"We had to reach the area where it's safe and I could connect to an untraceable satellite. The local regime is tracking all calls out of the country."

It sounded all fucking Greek to me. "But now it's safe?"

"I sent our location coordinates to someone who will hopefully come and get us." He didn't look very certain about it. "There are a few minutes left. Call your son."

He didn't have to say it twice. I snatched the phone and turned it over in my hand. There were numbered keys there.

Without wasting any time, I punched in Alessio's number with trembling fingers.

Gunfire sounded in the distance, filling the air. My eyes locked on the horizon and I waited, holding my breath. Each ring made my heart sink a bit. What if Alessio didn't answer?

My heart clenched in my chest. Weeks without Kol and Alessio felt like a lifetime.

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CHAPTER 44

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ALESSIO



Two months without her.

Fear and fury at my failure rolled through me with ice and fire. I should have been able to secure a way into that goddamn country. I should have gotten her out by now.

Instead nothing.

Dante DiLustro was fucking refusing to provide me a direct contact for his Afghanistan supplier who could get me in.

I guess he was paranoid that I'd take him out of the equation and make a deal directly with them. It didn't even cross my fucking mind. I just needed a way into Afghanistan, so I could get my woman out.

The Olympic reports on gold medals played on the screens. The U.S. won the pair figure skating gold and the whole country raved about the female ice skater. Annoying as fuck.

Byron wanted to meet. He had news and was on his way back from visiting one of the DiLustros. I hoped it was Dante. I needed a way in.

So here I was, at a small coffee shop in downtown D.C. ready to hear the news. It better be good news, because the next step was kidnapping the little fucker and torturing the information out of him. I regretted not starting with

that method. I hoped to go about it the right way and not earn more enemies.

"Cookie?" Kol eyed the assortment of croissants, chocolate chip and sugar cookies.

"How about a croissant?" I suggested softly.

I should have left him with Branka or Autumn's parents, but I couldn't stand to leave him all day. A few hours here and there were fine. Besides, my little guy loved airplanes, and I took the opportunity to take him on my private jet.

It was the first time since Autumn was gone that I'd seen him so excited. He couldn't decide which window to look out of. And then when I took him to the front of the plane where the pilot was, his eyes lit up like the brightest star and he smiled so happily, he reminded me of his mother.

"Daddy, cookie." Kol pushed his palms against the glass separating him from the cookies. "Please, please, please. Daddy, cookie."

I lowered down to my knees. "Okay, cookie. But first we eat lunch. Okay?"

He grinned, nodding eagerly. I worried maybe he didn't hear a single word after okay.

"He has you wrapped around his little finger." Byron's amused voice came from behind me. Kol and I shifted our eyes to him. Just like me, my brother wore his suit.

My son's hands came around my neck. I rose up, lifting him up with me and the whole time Kol's eyes never wavered from Byron.

"It's okay, buddy," I assured him. "This is Uncle Byron."

Surprise flickered in Byron's eyes. Truthfully, it surprised me too. The words came out without a second thought and considering what he and Royce had done for me, I owed him that much.

"Hello, Kol," Byron greeted him. "You look like your daddy."

Kol grinned. "My daddy."

A chuckle escaped me. "You got that right."

“Maman?” I knew he’d bring her up. He missed her. We both did.

“Maman is yours too,” I rasped. “We’ll get her back.”

“We will,” Byron agreed, smiling at his nephew. “We Ashfords might not always agree but we always bring family home.”

Kol nodded seriously and it had me choking up. It turned out having a kid did that to a man. Years of beatings and misery didn’t choke me up, but hearing my son calling me daddy was enough to have me choking on emotions.

Jesus Christ, I had to toughen up before I brought Autumn home and we had more babies.

“Can you find us a table please? I’ll get Kol lunch and a cookie,” I told Byron.

He nodded. “Get me a cookie too,” he retorted, winking at Kol.

Five minutes later, we were seated at the window table, the busy city life passing us by. Kol dug into his food, intent on eating his lunch so he could get his cookie. Byron and I nursed black cups of coffee.

“What do you have for me?” I asked him, getting straight to business.

“I got you a way into Afghanistan,” he replied.

My heart stilled for a second then started thundering with hope. “When?”

“You might not be happy when you hear what it cost,” Byron remarked dryly.

“I don’t give a f-” I stopped myself from cursing. I didn’t want Kol to pick it up. “I’ll pay any price. Give everything I have.”

Byron’s face darkened slightly. “That’s the problem,” he grumbled. “This is something you don’t have. Not yet. I tried to bribe him but the little pricks are stubborn.”

“Little pricks?” I had a feeling who he was talking about.

“My cousins, the little prick kingpins. Their unhinged ways will bring on the next world war.”

"That might be an understatement," I snickered. It didn't matter though, whatever they wanted, I'd give it. If I didn't have it, I'd get it. For Autumn, I'd crawl on my knees, lie, cheat and kill. "Now tell me what they want and I don't have."

"Once you marry Autumn and the Corsican organization is turned over to her, hence you, they want you to get them out of Philly."

"Done." It was a no brainer. I was getting out anyhow.

"Just like that?" Byron eyed me suspiciously.

"Just like that," I confirmed. "I'm getting out of that kind of life. Autumn was raised differently. She wants to save the world. For Kol to have a normal and safe childhood, like hers. And so do I."

"So it will be black and white from now on?"

A sardonic breath left me. "It's never just black and white. There are so many damn shades of gray, and I'll always do whatever it takes to protect my family. But I don't need the illegal business nor the Corsican organization. So if he wants them out of Philly, they'll be out of Philly."

"Okay, then," he mused. "This went easier than I thought. I'll send Dante a message and let's wait for the information while we enjoy the cookie. What do you say, Kol?"

"Maman. Cookie," Kol mumbled with food in his mouth as if he understood a deal was just made to get his Maman back.

I'm coming for you, Autumn. Just hold on a bit longer.

For Kol. For me. For us.

I SAT around the table with Nico, Byron, and Sasha Nikolaev in Nico's office. His kids screamed, some cried,

others played. Nico's entire manor was a zoo - but a good kind of zoo. Kol was here too, currently under Bianca's cookie spell. He'd probably be full of sugar thanks to her constant baking.

I finally made a deal with Dante DiLustro. Thanks to Byron. Basilio DiLustro kidnapped Wynter, Liam Brennan's niece. To secure this passage to the Afghanistan mountains, Byron backed the DiLustros rather than his half-sister's family... my half-sister, Davina. And I promised the Corsican mafia would be out of Philly once I married Autumn.

Needless to say, I owed him. Fucking big time.

I finally held Dante's contact in my hand. I sent my pilot a note to be ready - day or night. We had a way in, the problem was where do we start.

We had no idea where to start the search and at this point, we could use all of the help we could get. Time was of the essence.

"If I had to guess, they'd make their way to the mountains." Byron pointed to the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the map. It was the same way I tried to get into Afghanistan a few months back.

"That was my thought too," I grumbled. "That mountain goes for almost a hundred miles. Or if they are trying to cross into Pakistan, that is an additional sixteen hundred miles. It's the proverbial needle in a haystack. It won't be in and out."

My eyes traveled over the map. "Mountains are where I'd wager they are hiding."

"I think that's our best bet," Nico agreed. "The satellite surveillance shows a lot of activity in the mountains from the local military. They've been circling it like vultures."

Just the thought of Autumn hiding, being chased like a dog made me want to go on a murder spree. Punish every single person that dared to even think about hurting her.

The door to Nico's office opened and Bianca strode in with a tray full of cookies. Nico's eyes darted to his wife

and instantly his expression softened.

"Any luck?" she asked.

"We have a way in," Byron told her. "If we could only get fucking coordinates narrowed down."

"I'll come with you," Sasha offered. "I have nothing better to do. At least not for the foreseeable future."

"What? No more DiLustro hunting?" Byron asked dryly. Sasha just shrugged, but a gleam in his eyes promised trouble. So much fucking trouble that I was glad he wasn't related to me.

"Nah, I moved on. I have a more enticing target," Sasha answered, the shark grin on his face not boding well for whoever he had in mind.

I'd need Sasha's skills, but fuck if I had energy to decipher his cryptic messages. Or his psychotic ways.

"I'll need your sniper skills," I told him reluctantly. "Just sniper skills."

"Fine, sniper skills it is." He shrugged. "But your goddamn loss. I'm more fun in hand-to-hand combat."

God help me, I didn't know how Sasha's siblings dealt with this crazy motherfucker. But before I could say anything else my phone rang. I answered it without glancing at the caller ID.

"Russo."

"Alessio." The soft voice I'd recognize anywhere.

"Autumn, are you back?" Silence. "Autumn?"

"No," she croaked. "I don't have much time. I wanted to hear your voice. And K-Kol's." Her voice broke on our son's name.

"Everything will be fine," I told her. "I'm coming to get you."

"No. Promise me you'll stay away." Her voice grew smaller with each word.

Byron's phone rang at the same time, but I ignored it all. I locked eyes with Nico and mouthed, "Track my phone."

I put the call on speakerphone and had the number displayed. Without prompting, Byron typed it into his phone too.

"Whose phone is this?" I asked her.

"It's a satellite phone," she mumbled. "I have no idea where Kian found it. Please, Alessio. Promise me you won't come." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "For Kol."

"It is for Kol that I'm coming for you," I rasped. "I'm no good without you."

I didn't give a shit who heard my admission. It was true. I needed her back in my home, my life, my bed.

"No. Stay home. Be safe."

My heart clenched. It sounded too much like goodbye. I didn't like it.

"C-can I hear Kol's voice?" Her voice broke. "I miss him so much. I want to hear him, just in case I don't- "

"Don't you fucking say it," I growled. "Don't you dare think it, Autumn. I'm coming for you. I have a way in. Tell me where you are."

"We're hiding in the mountains." I locked gazes with Byron. Mountain was the right call.

"Drop me your location pin."

"It's a satellite phone," she explained. "I don't think it has a pin. Alessio, I need you to listen to me; I don't have much time. Just in case I don't make it back, promise me you'll keep Kol out of the underworld. Please."

"You're going to make it back," I vowed, my voice trembling. For fuck sake, my voice was shaking and cold sweat formed on my skin. This fear was like ice in my chest. "I'm coming to get you. We'll keep him out of the underworld together."

I could hear gunfire in the background. It sounded like it was getting closer. The sounds of bullets were louder than when I first answered the phone.

"Please take care of Kol," she whispered, her voice hard to hear. "I should have-" A long pause. "Four years and

then this."

"We'll have the next forty years. You stay safe until I get there," I ordered stubbornly. "You'll be home before the week is out."

Sobs followed. "I-I don't know—" Her voice broke.

I needed to see her. Protect her. "You *will* come home. You can even break my heart and I won't be an asshole. Ever again. We'll fight and make up. But you *will* come home."

Her whimpers were my answer. She lost faith. She was scared. And it was tearing my soul to shreds. I could tolerate anyone's pain but hers.

"P-please, can I hear Kol's voice?" she choked out. More soft sobs followed. "Just in case—"

Bianca was in front of me, Kol in her arms. She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes shining with tears. Fuck, I wanted to cry too. But I couldn't break down now.

"Hey, buddy," I murmured softly. "Maman is on the phone. Can you say hi to her?"

"Maman," Kol's eyes stared at my phone.

"Oh, baby. Yes, it's me," she cried. "I miss you so much. D-did you have a nice Christmas?"

"Daddy can go on the plane," Kol babbled. "Bring Maman home?"

"I-I don't know, baby." Her voice trembled and it gutted me. It twisted an invisible knife in my heart and made me bleed.

"You're going to come home," I growled. "I'll come for you. Just hang in there. I'm coming for you. You just stay alive. Be strong, just a bit longer."

Shouting and screams filled the background.

"Autumn, we have to run." A woman's voice. Baby crying. Men shouting. "The Taliban found us."

My heart froze. It fucking froze. I'd gone through my share of things but this fear was unlike anything else I experienced.

I could hear her deep inhale, like she needed courage.

"Kol, Mommy loves you," she whispered. "O-okay?"

"Okay, Maman."

"Good boy," she croaked. "I have to talk to your daddy."

I nodded at Bianca and she took him out of the room.

"Please take care of Kol. My parents... please keep them in Kol's life. Keep him safe. Not a part of crime. Make him feel l-loved, and if he f-forgets me," her voice broke and a hiccup escaped her, " -tell him I'll always love him."

Her last word broke on a choked sob. "You'll tell him yourself," I said firmly. "We are going to raise him together. The right way."

She whimpered while explosions sounded in the background. "I-I'm scared, Alessio," she admitted with a soft sob. "I never thought it'd end- "

"This is not the end," I growled. "Just the beginning. You are mine. You've always been mine. And I'll be damned if I let this be it. I'll come and get you," I vowed. "I'll get you and God help me, Autumn, I'm never letting you go. And wherever you go, I'll go." She whimpered. "Don't cry, love. I'm coming for you."

A high-pitched scream sounded in the background. Blaze of gunfire, shots, more screams.

"Autumn?" I roared.

More screams.

"Head down." A man's voice barked at her. Her voice was distant, shaky. I could feel her fear in my own bones.

A loud blast echoed through the line. Another explosion.

"Autumn, listen to me," I shouted, getting her attention. "Stay on the line. We need to trace the call. So we can get the location."

Another roar of an explosion sounded through the receiver. And then dreaded silence followed.

"Autumn?" I rasped. No answer. "Autumn?" I roared.

My eyes frantically turned to search out Nico. Dread pooled in my stomach at his expression.

“Did you get the location?” The voice didn’t sound like mine, it was too calm. Too distant. But my mouth moved, the question was mine.

“I have the general area,” Nico answered. “It should be enough to scan. Something to start with.”

“We should head out today,” Sasha grumbled. “The longer they’re there, the less chance of their survival.” I nodded. “If the Taliban captures them, they’ll r-”

“Don’t you fucking say it,” I warned, my control fraying. “Don’t you dare.”

Sasha gave me a somber look. “Just be prepared. She might not be the same.”

He’d know. He saw my sister’s face right before she took her own life.

ALMOST THREE MONTHS.

It has been ten weeks and three days since I last held her. At the same time I talked to Autumn, Byron received coordinates from Senator Ashford. That was three days ago. The Senator’s mercenary sent him the information, although thanks to Nico we knew they were on the move.

Because they were under attack.

My woman who wanted to save the world was under attack. Despite the cold temperatures, sweat rolled down my spine. I exhaled slowly, calming my pulse.

I just had to get my woman home. To our son.

The air in the helicopter was heavy, the tension thick. Sasha, Byron, and I were armed to the teeth. Nico was better suited to surveilling the area and being our eyes and ears from back home.

Conversation was impossible, the helicopter motor too loud. I didn’t have it in me to utter a single sentence. There

was only one word, one name to be exact, that played in my mind. Over and over again. Autumn.

When I get her back, I'd hug her for days. Then insert a microchip into her so I'd always be able to track her.

I lowered my eyes to my phone. Our target was a green dot on our phone screen. Nico's tracking device was on all our devices. Moving higher and higher up the mountain.

According to Nico, there were six people to rescue, including Autumn. It matched information Byron received from Senator Ashford. We'd save them, and failing wasn't an option.

I promised my son. I promised my sister. And Autumn's parents.

"Five minutes to landing." The pilot's voice was low in my ear. Sasha checked the ammunition on his sniper rifle. He called it his baby. Fucking weird but as long as he ended each fucker threatening Autumn, he could call it his mistress. I didn't give a fuck.

Byron ran through his weapons too, checked each one of them. The helicopter landed. A wordless nod. I was front, Byron checking our left and Sasha being our eyes from up there and eliminating anyone with their eyes on us.

My heart thundered against my ribs. To be so close to my woman, yet be so far away. We hoped to be in and out. Once we get to Autumn and the mercenaries, we should have a decent chance at getting out of here.

Byron and Sasha trained for this. Sasha served with my dead sister, and his skills were well sought after. Byron served a good number of years in special ops. We were dressed in tan cargo pants and black Kevlar vests under our jackets. We've traveled for the past two days and all of us sported stubble.

The helicopter landed, my breath stilled, and we were on the move. With our guns ready to shoot, our fingers on the trigger, the three of us exited the helicopter and were on the move.

Sasha's eyes scanned the area for the best spot to watch our backs. I knew the moment he found it. He was ready to cover us.

"Get your woman," Sasha said coolly. I started to think Nikolaev was an adrenaline junkie. "Get back. No detours."

A terse nod.

We made our way down the mountain, following the green dot Nico was tracking. Thank God Nico was able to pin the satellite phone after getting coordinates from Senator Ashford.

"Hurry up." Nico's voice projected in my ear. Byron and Sasha could hear the same. "They are surrounded."

"I can start eliminating now," Sasha growled, his tone dark in my earpiece.

"Do it," I said. "It'll give them a chance to fight them off."

Byron's finger was on the trigger. So was mine. If only we were already there so I could start killing those motherfuckers. The mountain rocks slowed our movements. The snow slowed our movements.

Another steep mountain cliff and it was then that I saw it. A group of thirty militants surrounding two women and four men. Autumn. I'd recognize her anywhere. She wore a burka but her headpiece was off.

The fear on her face was gut wrenching. Her eyes were stark brown, tears wetting her thin face. Fuck, she was so fucking thin.

Two heartbeats, Two silent breaths. A shared look with my brother. A nod and we rushed, snow crunching under our boots. Sasha's bullets flew through the air. One by one, the men started dropping.

My rage mixed with adrenaline, The mercenaries fought against the men. One stuck to Autumn, and for the first time in my life, I actually hoped the fucking guy would remained glued to her.

With each step closer, I could see it. The fucking young boys using guns to attack my woman and her group. Those teenagers shouldn't be here on this mountain, fighting in combat. They should be plucked off this godforsaken place and put somewhere where guns were out of their reach.

But I couldn't think about that now. I couldn't second guess it now. I couldn't save them. It was down to them or my woman.

Byron and I ran towards them. Aimed. Pulled the trigger. *Bang.* Repeat.

My jaw was tight. My brow was set with determination. I had to get to my woman. Get her out of this hellhole. She still hadn't seen me. Her eyes were trained on a gun pointed at her while her bodyguard fought off three men.

"Sasha, kill the fucker pointing the gun at her," I issued a gruff order. Thank fuck Sasha listened. He might have a way to agitate people out in the normal society, but here he was efficient and deadly.

I heard the bullet fly through the air. The whizzing sound that had the man falling to the ground. Another man went after Autumn. She threw herself onto the ground, reaching for the gun that lay on the mountain snow.

A baby screamed from somewhere. I scanned the surroundings but couldn't see it. I returned my gaze to Autumn who now had trained a gun on one of the men.

My gun. Even from here I could see the logo on it. Another ten steps and I'd reach her. It was too far away. The enemy was slowly dwindling down. Sasha was a good shot. So was Byron. The three of us managed to reduce the number of them from thirty to ten.

Someone slammed into me. My body went tumbling down onto the snow, softening my fall. We tumbled over each other, my head slamming against one of the rocks.

I gritted my teeth, ignoring the pain in my skull.

"Alessio." A woman's scream. My woman's scream.

I turned my head to see Autumn covered by some fucker, his gun pointed at her skull.

"Sasha," I hissed, punching the fucker above me in his ribs.

"She's fighting him too much." His voice was dead calm, so opposite of my erratic heartbeat. "One wrong move and the bullet will hit her skull instead of his."

The fucker on top of me refused to stop fighting too. I reached for the knife in my calf holster and stabbed him in his temple.

A howl filled the cold mountain air. It vibrated through my skull causing a buzzing in my ears. I jumped to my feet and saw Byron fighting men, trying to get to Autumn.

I raised my gun. Aimed. Pulled the trigger. Sasha did the same, clearing my path towards my woman. No wonder the guy was cocky as shit. His sniper skills were incomparable.

It seemed like it took forever to get to her. Fighting underneath the body too big for her to shove off her. My fingers gripped the guy's hair and I jerked him off her. Without sparing him a glance, I pointed the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger.

Autumn's high-pitched scream traveled over the mountain. Blood splattered all around us and the wide eyes full of fear darted to me. Recognition flickered in them. Her face had blood splattered on it. I didn't care. She was still the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

"Alessandro?" She kept blinking, as if she thought she lost her mind.

The whizzing sounds around me told me Sasha was in turbo mode, eliminating the enemy around us. I fell down to my knees and cradled her into my arms.

"I told you I'd come for you," I rasped, my voice hoarse. "You owe me a wedding."

CHAPTER 45

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AUTUMN



“You owe me a wedding.”

A choked sob burst from my lips. Of all the things to say.

“Anything you want,” I cried, throwing my hands around him and showering kisses all over his stubble chin and neck. “I stink. I’m sorry.”

He inhaled deeply and embarrassment washed over me.

“You smell like my woman,” he murmured, then brought his lips against mine. Another wretched sob escaped me. “Don’t cry, love. Let’s go home to our son.”

I swallowed, blinking the tears lingering on my lashes. He pulled me up, then shoved me behind him. I heard a faint voice, but couldn’t place it.

Alessio nodded, then turned to face me. “We have to run back to the chopper and get out of here. There are more soldiers coming this way.”

My eyes darted to the companions that stayed with me for the past four months. “We can’t leave them behind.”

“We’re not leaving anyone behind,” he reassured me. I followed his gaze and stared in shock at Byron.

Kian came back to me, his breathing heavy. “You good?”

I took his hand into mine and squeezed. “Yes, you?” I sensed more than saw both Kian and Alessio stiffened. Kian nodded. “Let’s go home.”

Another man was already shuffling Salma our way. "Is the baby okay?" I asked her.

"Baby?" Alessio asked.

Salma moved her burka, hiding her baby girl underneath it.

"Jesus Christ, they had a baby with them this entire time?" It was Sasha's voice that came through someone's radio. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Not with Autumn. I don't know whether to be impressed or not."

"Be impressed," Alessio gritted. I buried my face into his chest, then inhaled deeply. Sandalwood and spice. God, I fucking missed him.

"Is Kol okay? Safe?" I murmured.

"Always." Alessio's mouth pressed against my forehead. "Okay, let's go," he ordered, his breathing hard. All the men breathed hard. "There are more soldiers on their way."

He didn't have to say it again. Alessio's hand in mine, we all ran. I ignored the burning of my tired muscles, the ache in my bones.

Despite the cold air and lack of winter clothes, sweat trickled down my spine. But Alessio's hand in mine poured his strength into me and kept me going.

I had no idea how long we ran when I finally saw the helicopter. The moment the pilot saw us, he started it. The blades ran in circles. Faster and faster.

A figure jumped onto the ground from our right, startling Kian. His hand shot up, aiming at...

"Sasha?" I blurted out, shockingly.

"He's a friend," Byron told Kian. "A crazy one but still a friend."

Sasha grinned, not sparing Kian a glance. That Nikolaev was fearless.

"Not bad for a man you'd watch having his heart carved out," he drawled. "Huh?"

I didn't have a lot of energy left but my cheeks heated nonetheless. I closed the distance between us and hugged

him. Alessio followed, his towering frame right behind me, comforting and protective.

"Thank you," I whimpered, sniffing. "Thank you so much, Sasha." His big arms wrapped around me. "I'm sorry, I'm stinky," I murmured my apology, all the while sniffing. Then hugging him again. "Thank you for- "

My voice choked, trembling. The words failed me. So many emotions shuddered in my chest. I swallowed. "I- I..." I wiped my face with the trembling hands. "I owe you big time."

He nodded. "Maybe one day I'll collect."

I turned my head to Byron. "And thank you too," I murmured, hugging him.

His one hand came around and he pecked my cheek. "Anytime. You're family." I offered him a shaky smile. "Now let's get out of this place, my soon to be sister-in-law."

We all hustled into the helicopter, Alessio's hand never letting go of mine. I wanted to ask about Kol. My parents. Branka. But there was no way of making conversation. So I just held his hand and enjoyed his warmth.

Two hours in the helicopter.

We arrived at a private airport in Pakistan. Alessio instructed us to remain inside, leaving us with Sasha while he and Byron stepped out.

"Is everything okay?" I asked as I straightened up in my chair, my eyes flickering to Sasha, then back to Alessio. There were soldiers waiting for them in front of the large airplane, blocking our way out.

"Yeah, it better be," Sasha said. He didn't sound worried. "Or Byron's cousin will be a fucking dead DiLustro."

"Huh?" I didn't follow what Sasha was trying to say. I had no fucking idea what he meant. I kept my gaze on the empty airport, a row of soldiers armed to the teeth as they stood at attention. Byron and Alessio only had handguns tucked in the back of their pants.

“Byron made a deal with one of the kingpins,” Sasha explained seeing my confusion. “Let’s say the little pricks came out very well.”

“Oh.”

I held my breath, worried that something would go awry right as the light at the end of the tunnel flickered.

Alessio turned, nodded and Sasha stood up.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Sasha and Kian followed close behind me, the other men surrounding Salma and her baby, as all of us rushed from the helicopter and towards the airplane. I climbed up the stairs of the airplane, my knees shaking with each step.

“It’s okay.” Alessio’s voice was right behind me, his palm comforting on the small of my back. “Just get into the cabin and we’re out of this shithole.”

I took a step up. And another.

It seemed to take forever but finally we were inside the cabin. The moment we were in, Alessio shut the cabin door.

“Let’s go,” he issued the order to the pilot.

Ten minutes and we were high up in the air. It wasn’t until I could see the clouds all around us that a shuddering breath finally left me and tears welled in my eyes.

Lifting me up into his arms, Alessio took me to the back of the plane and shut the door with his foot.

It was then that I fell apart.

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CHAPTER 46

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ALESSIO



Autumn's sobs shook her body, her face buried in my chest. Right above the heart that belonged to her. She had owned my heart from the moment we locked eyes eight years ago on her eighteenth birthday.

"Shhh." I murmured into her jet black hair. She still smelled of fall and apples to me. Like my home. "I'm here now. I'll always be here."

Her raven hair fell down her slim body. It had lost its shine and her face was so pale, the contrast to her dark hair stark. Dark circles dimmed her beautiful hazel eyes that seemed more brown than ever. Almost lifeless, but I'd bring her back to life. She'd live happy and carefree, with Kol and me.

Because the alternative wasn't an option. I'd commit murder, crawl on my knees, and go through fire to ensure her eyes would never be brown again.

Her body trembled in my arms. Fuck, she was a rack of bones. Her burka was bunched at the middle of her thighs. She was still wearing jeans, every visible inch of her covered with dirt and blood.

Jesus, blood.

Even her hands had blood on them. Her lip was busted and there were dark shadows under her eyes. Those

bruises looked even starker against her raven hair and pale skin.

Fucking fuck.

I was too late. I was too fucking late.

"I'm sorry, love," I whispered. "I'm sorry for taking so long to get to you. Nobody will ever hurt you again."

I ran my fingers softly over her face. The fury pulsed inside me, at myself. At the world who dared to hurt her.

I held her trembling body close to me, thanking all the saints for finally having her in my arms.

"You came for me," she rumbled into my chest. "You came for me."

"I'll always come for you. I'll burn this world to ashes to find you and Kol. Always."

"I thought- " she croaked, her voice trembling. "I thought I'd never see you again. Or Kol." Her slim fingers clutched my shirt. "I missed all those days with him." She raised her eyes, her hazels shimmering brown. "D-does he still remember me?"

I took her chin between my fingers and held her gaze. "We talked about you every day. He'll never forget you. And he's waiting for you. Your parents, Branka, Kol. We have all waited for you."

Little specks of green appeared in her eyes. "I was so stupid," she murmured. "Reckless. I could have lost-"

"No," I murmured, pressing my mouth to her forehead. "Kind-hearted. There is a difference."

She shuddered in my arms. "God, I'd kill for a bath," she murmured.

"Let's make it happen." My private plane had a full luxury bathroom so I swooped her up and carried her into my bathroom. I sat her on the cushioned seat, then turned on the bathtub faucets. I opened a bottle of bubble bath and poured it into the water.

The scent of apple and mint filled the air. Her tear stained face watched my every move as I moved to retrieve

the plush towels as well as the clothes I had packed for her.

Then I came back to her and kneeled in front of her.

"Shall I help you take your clothes off?" I offered softly.

A pause. Insecurity I wasn't accustomed to seeing flashed across her face. It fucking gutted me. If those men touched her, I'd go back and fucking kill them all.

"Did someone—" Fuck, I couldn't even say the words. I'd endure millions of years of abuse, if it'd only spare her.

She shook her head and relief flooded through me like cool spring water. "No, Kian kept me safe." Her hands wrapped around herself. "You might not like what you see." Her small voice and vulnerability in her eyes sliced my heart. It fucking made my heart bleed.

"Impossible," I told her. "When you're a hundred-years-old, frail, with silver hair and covered in wrinkles, you'll still be the most beautiful woman to me. The only woman for me."

The red rimmed her eyes, fighting her tears, and it made my heart ache. "Let me help you," I offered gently.

I watched her slim neck move as she swallowed, then gave me a small nod. Slowly, I pulled off her burka. Then I bent down and slipped her black Tory Burch combat boots off. Jeans followed. Then socks. Her shirt was next. A man's shirt.

When my eyes flickered to hers, she explained, "Kian gave it to me because it was cold."

I nodded, then discarded it. Next was a white t-shirt. I recognized it. It was the same one she wore during the snippet that played on television. It had become a widely broadcasted clip. We had to keep the television off the new channels so Kol wouldn't see his mother in the midst of gunfire.

A shiver wracked her body. My eyes traveled over her pale skin. Her rib bones were prominent against her skin. Her hip bones showed. But there was a tiny bump on her lower belly.

My eyes flicked to hers, then to her belly. "Are you- "

I swallowed. It couldn't be. Men like me didn't get so lucky. Men like me didn't deserve it, not after all I had done.

"I think so," she murmured softly. Slowly, I placed my trembling hand on her stomach and hers came to rest on top of mine. "I'm not sure though. It could be just stress. Maybe? I don't know."

"It's okay," I assured her. "We'll find out together. We'll get through everything together." Her shuddering breath filled the space between us. "Together," I repeated.

She nodded. "Together."

I unclasped her bra, then helped with her panties.

She was naked in front of me. She was still the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes on. But it was the look on her face that shattered me.

"Ready to soak and relax?"

"Yes." A hint of a small, soft smile. The one that I remembered.

I held her hand and helped her in, unwilling to let her go. Not yet. The water splashed softly as her body slowly lowered into the bath.

"Ahhh." Her soft sigh came from her lips.

"Good?"

"Perfect. Thank you."

Her cheeks flushed under the warm water and my eyes studied the way her skin glistened, the bubbles hiding her body from me. She looked so small in the tub, her eyes slowly turning greener with each passing second.

I reached for the shampoo, then sat on the edge of the tub. I uncapped the shampoo and washed her hair. The jet black hair reflected the light. I kept my movements meticulous, massaging her scalp with firm, deep strokes. Her eyes fluttered shut, her long dark lashes stark against her cheeks. Her breaths were even and steady, and I found

that even if she told me to stop touching her, I wouldn't be able to.

Months of tension and the fear of losing her to the fucking war seeped out of me with each second. I savored her every soft sigh. Months without her just about killed me. Each second touching her brought me back to life.

I started shampooing her hair at the roots and scrubbed her scalp, then slowly rinsed the shampoo out of her hair. Next I worked the conditioner into her strands. After I finished lathering it up into her hair, I rinsed it out with fresh water.

"We have a long flight. Want to soak longer?" She shook her head.

I helped her out of the tub, then softly patted her dry with a towel. I dried her hair next after carefully getting all the knots out.. It soothed me to finally be able to touch her. The pain in my chest slowly loosening with each inhale of her scent.

"Yoga pants or jeans?" I asked her. I'd had a bag packed with her clothes for weeks, dragging it with me anywhere I went. Byron was the only one that dared to comment on it. And it was only because he reminded me to pack comfortable clothes, socks and handed me a pair of new Ugg boots in her size that I didn't punch him.

"Yoga pants, please," she murmured, watching my every move. "Do you have an extra sweatshirt of yours that I can wear?"

I nodded and then helped her with yoga pants, my sweatshirt followed. The pants hung loosely on her and it broke my heart. Socks followed, then the Uggs. Her eyes closed and a small exhale left her lips. My shirt swallowed her small frame but it looked right on her. It made it clear to anyone with two eyes that she was mine.

Silence stretched. It wasn't uncomfortable but there were so many things I wanted to say to her. I wanted to start a new life with a clean slate.

"I ended all my illegal business details," I started softly. Her eyes opened and found my gaze. Green, then brown, back to green. "Seeing one of my guns pointed at you, it was a wakeup call. I didn't care where those went, until I saw that footage. I ended it all. I'm done with it all."

Her tongue darted out, sweeping over the bruised lip. Our gazes held, the eyes that have captured me from the moment we met. And in them I saw all I needed to.

"I love you." Three simple words that held so much power. But only when she said them.

"I didn't know what love was," I rasped. "You taught me the meaning of it. You gave me hope for it. I have loved you from the first word you uttered. First smile and I was deeper under your spell. First kiss and I was all yours."

"Ditto," she choked. "You were the hottest, and only guy, to ever step foot in my bedroom."

My lips tipped up. "I better be. Or there'll be some spanking going on."

This time she smiled too. "Promise, old man?"

There was my girl. She might not be a killer or ruthless, but she was strong nonetheless.

"I promise." If she'd ask for stars, I'd find a way to bring them down for her. My hands smoothed over her shoulders and down her spine, and I didn't miss the way she shivered under my touch. My cock instantly hardened, ready to pounce. "But first we'll feed you," I added, the need to take care of her trumping my own needs.

"Can you hold me?" she murmured, her face pressed against my chest. "Just for a bit longer."

As I held her, as our hearts beat as one.

TEN HOURS LATER, the plane landed and the cabin door opened. Hand in hand, we stepped outside and her steps

halted.

Kol stood with Autumn's parents, waiting for his maman.

Autumn's eyes darted my way. Green. Glistening with happy tears. The only ones I'd ever tolerate.

"I didn't want you to wait a second longer than you had to," I whispered.

"I love you," she murmured. "So damn much."

"Let's go to Kol."

Rushing down the steps, Autumn ran towards our son. He met her half way and my heart squeezed in my chest watching my family. She showered Kol's face with kisses, hugging him tightly and tears glistened on her lashes. But she kept her gaze on him, then back to me, and again to our son. As if she was scared it would all go away.

"It was all worth it." Sasha slapped me lightly on the back. "Remember this feeling right now when shit goes to hell."

I had no idea what the fuck he was talking about.

All I could focus on was my family. My future.

The future that would be worth every smile, tear and sorrow.

Because I had her by my side. Because they were mine.

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CHAPTER 47

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AUTUMN



I shot up in the bed, gripping the covers to my chest and my heart racing.

I blinked, then blinked again. It was dark. Too dark. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't hear anything. No guns. No whispers in an unfamiliar tongue. Whether Arabic, Spanish, or Italian. It was quiet.

I took a deep breath in, the familiar scent instantly soothing my erratic heartbeat.

"Alessio?" I called out, my eyes still trying to adjust to the dark.

"I'm here."

I followed the direction of the voice and found him sitting in the same chair he sat in the night I lost my virginity to him. The flicker of the red brim of the lit cigarette lit his face.

Tired. Worried. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

I shifted on the bed, bringing my feet up to my chest. "Why are you smoking then?"

He seemed to smoke only when he was stressed out.

"I'm scared if I fall asleep, I'll wake up to realize you're a dream. That you're still gone."

I understood the feeling. Ever since the rescue, I was terrified I'd wake up and still be in one of those caves.

"I'm here," I murmured.

"Come here," he rasped and without a second thought, I slid off the bed and padded across the floor to him.

I wore his t-shirt that hung low. I needed his scent on me to sleep peacefully. His hands came to my waist and pulled me onto his lap and my arms wrapped around him.

"Thank you for coming for me," I whispered for the hundredth time. My hand came to rest on my belly. "For both of us."

First thing I did when we arrived home was take a pregnancy test. With him. We sat on the tiled floor in the bathroom, waiting for the result. Together. The first pink plus had both of our hearts fluttering. So we took another test. And then I cried happy tears as he held me and whispered soft words.

"Always," he vowed and I believed him. "Don't you ever leave again. Not without me."

I ran my fingers through his hair. "I promise."

His eyes watched me, steady pools of gray. I used to think it was a cold color, but now it was the most beautiful color in the world.

"Tell me what's wrong," I demanded softly. My eyes flickered down my body. "I lost too much weight."

"You're still beautiful." His free hand took my nape and he pressed his lips against mine. "I don't care what you look like. I love *you*. Your soul. Your heart. Your strength. Your convictions about saving the world, even when they drive me nuts."

"I love you too." My forehead came to rest against his. There was peace in his arms. The feeling of completeness. "Tell me what's bothering you."

He extinguished the cigarette.

"I made a deal to get into Afghanistan," he retorted.

"Yes?" I urged.

"I promised to get the Corsican mafia out of Philly." The meaning of it sank in.

"So we need to get married?" My lips curved into a smile. "I'm on board. Unless you're not."

A sardonic breath left him. "I am so fucking on board. I've been on board for the past eight years."

"Stalker," I teased.

"Getting married is the easy part," he continued. "The hard part is that I have to eliminate your grandfather."

"Oh." Silence followed. A tense, yet almost comfortable silence. "We visit them and just tell them that's how it's going to be."

"And how is it going to be, love?"

"You signed a contract. You got me. The deal was their *business* comes to you. To us. So we get to do whatever we want with it."

"So you're okay giving it away?"

My hands cupped Alessio's cheeks. "Am I okay with it?" I rasped. "I thought I'd never see you or Kol again. I thought I'd have this baby," he put his hand on my lower belly, "alone. So fuck yes, I'm okay with it. I don't want it. And you've put that behind you. So let's do what needs to be done and just live our lives."

His nose brushed against mine. "We earned it; didn't we baby?" he murmured.

"You earned it even more than me."

TWO DAYS LATER, we sat in an obnoxiously blue, sixteenth century styled parlor. Or maybe it was an office. I couldn't quite tell.

Marcel Blanchet watched me, those weary eyes on his wrinkled face. The guy was the head of the Corsican mafia but he looked to almost have both feet in the grave. He was almost ninety for Pete's sake.

"I could teach you like I taught your mother," the old man grumbled, his voice hard to hear. Or maybe it was the fact that I was nervous to be here.

"I'm not interested," I answered. "Alessio will handle that business."

"Righteous like her father," the old man spat. "But stubborn and strong like her mother, I see."

My eyes flicked to Alessio, wondering if the old man complimented me or insulted me but his face was an unmoving mask. This was the ruthless man that people feared.

My grandfather, it was so strange to call him that, looked at Alessio. "So what are your plans?"

"We're pushing out of Philly," Alessio said, his tone cold. Almost bored.

My grandfather shot to his feet, and I had to blink twice to make sure my eyes were not deceiving me. Was someone so old supposed to move so fast?

"Never," my grandfather bellowed, his face turning red. He was about to have a heart attack on our account. "As long as there is breath in my body, that will never happen."

"That deal saved Autumn's life," Alessio continued like my grandfather hadn't spoken. "And it will ensure Autumn and our children are safe. A broken deal means death. For someone."

Grandfather waved his hands, muttering curses in French. Some I understood. They were the same ones my own mother had a tendency to repeat. Others, I had no clue what they meant.

"You should have let her die there," he hissed. I understood that one and so did Alessio. "We had your son. He could have taken over."

The tension was so thick, I could easily suffocate if I took a deep breath. Yet, Alessio seemed relaxed. Happy almost.

"Autumn."

"Yes?" My voice sounded small.

"Tell me does the window look to the gardens or the river?"

I blinked. My mind must be still hazy. Jet lag or something. "W-what?"

The air was so thick, it could be cut with a knife. It was cold outside, yet the temperature in this room spiked up thirty degrees. Easily.

"Please check the view from the window," Alessio repeated calmly. Our eyes met and he tilted his head to the large window behind me.

A heartbeat. Then another. I did as he asked. I made my way to the large ceiling-to-floor window, each step somehow heavier than the last. My palm came to the window and I sighed in relief against its cold surface. I was tempted to push my cheek against it.

Who knew after all those cold nights in Afghanistan that I'd need a cool window to cool off the palpable tension in this room!

I swallowed. "It looks to the river and- "

Crunch. Snap.

The sound of bones cracking came from behind me. My breaths paused, my heartbeat lingered in between the two beats.

"Leave the office." Alessio's voice was smooth. Calming. "Don't turn around and go out that door. Wait for me outside."

Without question or temptation to turn my head, I made my way to the door and stepped outside.

But that was where I remained until Alessio came out.

"You good?" The tranquility in his voice, on his face was all I needed to know, it would be okay.

"With you, always."

EPILOGUE

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THREE MONTHS LATER



Mountains surrounded us. The soft rush of the river traveled through the air, mixing with the rustle of the leaves and the scent of cherry blossoms.

Kyoto in spring was magnificent.

The last time Alessio and I were here was in the fall. I loved it then. I loved it even more now.

Sunshine replaced the rain. Empty streets were now full. Cherry blossom petals made the streets colorful. Temples full of worshipers.

It has been three months since Afghanistan.

The world kept turning. I have learned to move on.

The faint music drifted through the air, along with the soft pink petals of the cherry blossoms.

All eyes turned to me as the tunes changed from the local, traditional soft music to the bridal chorus.

Dad walked me down the aisle, where at the end of it Alessio waited for me along with our son. Both in matching suits. Both looking at me like I was their world.

Happy tears stung my eyes.

Alessio's brothers and sisters were with us. All of them. Even Senator Ashford. Alessio came to a reluctant peace with him and even legally changed his last name. There was no longer room for the dark ghost of the man who hurt him, his mother, his sisters, and his son.

All that mattered to me was that Alessio was happy and came to terms with it all. Everything else we'd figure out together.

My parents were here. Alessio's friends and their spouses. Everyone we loved and cared about came to celebrate with us.

Soon there'd be a new member to welcome to our family.

My hand came to my lower belly. I wore a simple white wedding dress that didn't do much to cover the baby bump. I didn't care. I was proud of it. She survived. We survived.

Six months pregnant.

Despite the hunger and hardship during the first trimester, the baby was healthy and growing fine. I was lucky. *We* were lucky.

Like a magnet, my eyes pulled back to the man standing at the end of the aisle, dressed in a sharp black tux. He has been waiting for me. Eight years.

The love and obsession in his eyes were all the confirmation I needed. Not that I had doubted my decision.

With each step I took closer to him, the world faded further into the background, leaving me alone with him.

The moment I came to stand in front of him, my father smiled. "Mrs. Corbin wants me to relay a message." A soft groan escaped me as I rolled my eyes. "Welcome to the family."

"Thank you," Alessio answered, his eyes never wavering from me as he took my hand. Our fingers interlaced and my heart blossomed like the cherry blossoms all around us.

As we said our vows in the midst of family and friends, neither one of us hesitated.

After all, eight years was a long time to wait.

He pulled me closer. "My heart beats in tune to a song only your heart can play. Your breath gives me life. Your cure to my scars. I'm forever yours, Autumn Ashford."

My lip quivered and my eyes shimmered with the love and happiness I felt for this man.

He lifted the veil, those molten silvers darkening to the most beautiful storms. His hands cupped my face, then he bent his head, his mouth hovering over mine.

“Your eyes are green,” he murmured.

“I’m happy.” My nose brushed against his. “Because you’re mine now.”

“I’ve always been yours. The lion will always worship his lioness.”

THE END

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XOXO

Eva Winners